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RAYMONDE MACHARD

TRANSLATED BY

MADELEINE BOYD

A Child Is Born

A Romance

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A Child Is Born

A ROMANCE

by

RAYMONDE MACHARD

Translated from the French by

MADELEINE BOYD

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To
ALFRED MACHARD

LOVE is the greatest of marvels for those who think. . . . Thinking about the love which binds us together, you remembered a very touching old legend and you wrote it again under the title "Popaul et Virginie," a book full of beauty and tenderness which you dedicated to me. I offer mine to Love. I am a devotee of Love. But for me you *are Love since you gave it life in the beautiful being of our little feminine Eros. . . .*

—R. M.

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THERE is one thing that men should know, a noble and lovely secret hidden by nature in woman's breast, the divine misunderstanding which to her is love . . . .

WHEN selfish pride tells the lover he has conquered a woman, he ought to realize that usually she has surrendered only to her own dream, her desire and love for children, which were conceived in her heart as soon as she was born. —*Michelet*

A Child Is Born

A Romance

PREFACE

Thou shalt bear a child. . . .

It seems as if this were one of the Ten Commandments. It is the prayer of the human race. It is a nation's prayer. It forces us to think of our state as women as a state of grace, thrust upon us by Nature, doubtless to remind men that they have the power of giving life, even if they forget themselves to the extent of causing untimely death. . . .

Is that why we ought to bear children? Must we be only the "reprocreators"? It is a sacred calling. But, at bottom, its sacredness leaves the feminine soul cold, as does the fact that it is a social duty. . . .

If men knew women they would not talk to them about "their beautiful rôle" in a sinister comedy; they would not argue, backed by statistics which are dry and soulless things; they would not exaggerate the femininity of women

by putting Motherhood on an official pedestal with its inevitable array of privileges, laws, decrees of all kinds and even monetary rewards, trying to reward with money those who bear in their children the hope and continuation of their country!

If men knew women they would simply talk to them about love. . . . They would awaken with a lover's words the thought that women unknowingly harbor in their hearts, the thought of the child.

Thus they would emotionally uncover this hidden treasure; and in causing its touching puerility, its unknown sweetness to live before the mind's eye of the beloved one, men would feel the sacred calling also, and there would be the beginning of perfect understanding.

And so one day, joyfully surprised, they would find themselves really united *for the first time,* standing beside a cradle.

That is the only conquest which the human race really desires. I offer it.

I

Today I came upon a woman feeding her child.

She had such an ecstatic expression that I felt within myself all that made me her sister, a sister living far away, whose emotions, although exactly like those that are my own life, found their cause in a different source. And I looked at the suckling in her arms.

It did not move. Its unformed eyes were staring into the unknown. Its small hand did not even know how to enjoy the caresses of the loving one who bent over it. . . .

Thus the baby appeared to me as an unknown god, dispensing deep joys only to his devotees.

I was jealous of that woman who could feel ecstasies unknown to me—to me who, glorying in my love, thought I had felt all possible ecstasies. I became conscious of a feeling of emptiness, of a beginning I had been privileged to enjoy—but only a beginning, which needed a consecration to be the great achievement of life.

Have I been a long time in coming back to you, my love? Do you know that it is because I counted all the mothers I saw along the way, as if I were under a spell?

But that evening I *doubly* loved you. . . .

II

I love him more than ever. My thoughts cling to him as to a mystery: from his love, another love may be born. . . .

He has become greater than a mere lover because his gestures have something of the infinite. . . .

III

I want you, O Motherhood!

I am full of pity for the mere mistress I have been till now: I was like those seekers of stars who imagine that they have reached the infinite in a supreme tension of their bodies.

Those seekers are poets . . . poets of all the sensations as of all the arts. I was carrying my infinite within my heart.

I have gone through the inevitable awakening. But I see in it the dawn of the Absolute: Motherhood through Love.

IV

I am already deeply troubled. . . .

The miracle is going to be helped by my blood and my life. My physical being is going to be used for its accomplishment. Has not my body in its poverty some hidden weakness which might interfere with it? . . .

Motherhood is a religion which must not find me wanting.

Mothers, listen to me. You want your child to be strong and beautiful. Why do you not feel that this depends upon you, especially at the supreme moment?

But you did not think that a child might come into being.

Isn't that true?

You were thinking only of love . . . physical love. And the child came before you had had time to think about that incarnation.

Why in this decisive hour of my life do I see now rise before me so many small suffering faces?

Where have I seen them? I do not know. In different places. I cannot put out of my

mind the vision of mothers bent over them and crying as if they were guilty.

We are all guilty. Chance alone saves us, even though later it crucifies us.

I tremble when I think that Motherhood might have found me unprepared.

Why do we not always think of Motherhood? Is it not the finest thing the human mind can think about? I am almost proud of having thought of it. I feel as if I had triumphed over life.

V

I have prepared my body as a communicant prepares his soul. . . .

I have jealously cared for my physical welfare, in the profound belief that something spiritual will come from it.

And when my body was ready, I returned it to thee, Love. . . .

A Child Is Born

I

I am waiting. . . .

Each day has an awful significance for me. Each day is nearer the one when I'll know if I am going to be a mother. . . .

I am very impatient and sometimes full of fears. It is a burden to live without knowing what's going to happen! But ignorance at least allows me to cling to my cherished hopes.

I can imagine the expectations, each time frustrated, of the woman who wants to be a mother and will never be one. It is rather as if death were already within herself. . . .

II

I awake.

And at once I feel conscious of my possible state. My heart beats. . . . Is that a sign? For the hundredth time I ask myself: Have I already felt this *before?* Or else: Did my heart beat like that? All puerile nothings engendered by my wish to be a mother.

My body keeps its secret. I am entombed within myself. And my pitiable mind vainly tries to solve the enigma that I am. . . .

Little by little my mind becomes calmer, and I can think about other things. I fall to thinking about animals . . . yes, animals *know* when their bodies have become sanctuaries and they show it by an unassailable reserve.

III

The great day. . . .

I was almost frightened to see it approaching. I went through all the shades of despair natural to human beings, who believe more easily in the impossible than in the simple realization of their natural desires.

This day rose for the world, and I was absent from it, segregated from everybody through my own free will.

The sun shone even to the foot of my bed where I remained, in spite of his invitation, full of mental anguish.

I waited for the evening . . . the evening which would be the end of this day I have dreaded for so long, the end of which might show the promise of a new life. . . .

I almost died of fear with the dying day. . . .

When I reopened my eyes, night had come as the announcement of motherhood.

I got up from my bed as from a discarded tomb and I saluted the dawn of that evening as the dawn itself of my life.

IV

"Madame Dumont-Dorville, if you please?"

"She is here."

"I want to speak to her."

"Come in. You'll have to wait awhile, she is very busy. Come in, hurry! Please excuse me! I have to leave you. She needs me!"

A door opened. I saw in a flash a bed, a plait of hair, a shining object which suddenly came flashing down. The door closed.

I don't know why my heart was cold.

I almost felt like crying. . . . It was so dark in that room. . . . And I don't know what was happening in that room full of a fearful silence. . . . It was exactly like the room where someone lies dead, full of people but where no one speaks. . . .

I was terribly afraid. . . .

Why was I so impressionable? Was it because of *The One* hidden within myself? I was already afraid that something might happen to him. . . . My dear little one.

I raised my anxious face. I waited, self-

ishly dead to all emotions which might come from the outside.

How dark it was . . . and still the same silence. It was strange . . . very strange. . . .

Heavens, what was that?

I almost jumped with fright. An animal had installed itself upon my knees. I was afraid to touch it. . . . But a purring reassured me. It was a cat. I held him tight! And in the darkness I listened quietly to the small living music of the cat's purrs. . . .

The door was ajar for an instant.

And again in a flash I saw the bed, the plait of hair, and caught a glimpse of a convulsed face. . . .

A voice—that of the woman who opened the door—exclaimed:

"Heavens, no light here! What was I thinking of? It is unpardonable. . . . I am going to get some light. Wait, *my child*. . . ."

I only heard those words: *my child*.

They touched my heart in a sensitive spot.

What charming words! *My child.* . . . How human they were, full of pity and just right. I felt small, I felt exactly like a child. I was touched that she should know it and treat me accordingly.

She came back with a lamp.

I laughed. I was not a bit frightened, you know! But my laughter did not deceive her and she set the lamp near me.

"Oh, I see Pouponne is with you. Will you wait a little longer, both of you? . . . It won't be much longer now. . . ."

She looked towards the mysterious room.

"Madame Dumont-Dorville will see you soon."

And as if the bare name recalled to her a pressing duty, she disappeared quickly to some unknown task.

Where was she going?

It seemed to me that I heard her, far away, behind innumerable doors, moving utensils about and letting water run endlessly.

The cat had fallen asleep in my arms. . . .

I did not know any more where I was. . . .

The moment was unreal. . . . I should have liked it to last always. . . . Not to exist any more?

A cry! Such a horrible cry! . . .

A horrible cry which went on forever! A demoniacal cry which tore my heart! An unreal cry which I could not stop in spite of my pleading hands, my gnashing teeth, my strength of will!

A cry which drove me wild and made me cry in the same way: "Ha!" It was over. . . . Was it? It seemed as if something of that cry had remained within me. . . .

Suddenly I burst out laughing with my eyes full of tears, because, as if to put me in the right, I heard within my heart the cry of a newly born child. . . . How touching were those small cries of life after the heartrending cry of death I had heard! . . . They appeared to be coming from my inner self. . . . I listened to them in a heaven set aside for mothers, where only their ears are charmed by those cries. . . .

I see the babe with its tiny feet let loose, gesticulating, unashamed, before the midwife.

How I would love to kiss the little monster! The assistant came running, she ran through the room where I sat, saying to me as she passed, "He has come!" and she went laughing into the next room.

The cat ran away, frightened out of her wits. . . .

Why did not I too go into that room? Why did I not say to those women, "Here I am," so that, recognizing me, they would say: "All right, stay with us!"

What made me restrain my impulse?

I did not dare. . . . I was afraid of being unwanted, although all I wanted was to share with one of them her moments of suffering and love.

Have we reached the point where we have to restrain our best impulses out of respect for the conventions of our education?

I remained still, although my whole being was aching to help this companion of my fate.

A woman with a placid face came in and said in a calm voice: "My child, I am at your service."

I looked at her as if she had suddenly become mad.

I almost took her by the arm and said to her: "You blaspheme; you belong to no one, you, who speak as if this were an ordinary instant when something of the divine has just passed among us. . . ."

But I said nothing. I did not dare. . . .

I looked at her putting back her rings on her fingers with slow and meticulous gestures.

Her hands hypnotized me. . . . They appeared to be gifted with a soul. They *spoke*. From that moment I only saw her hands. They really were the face of that woman.

And I worshiped those hands which made her say to me in a tranquil voice, "My child, I am at your service," certain, as she was, of being able to give herself entirely, through her capable and helpful hands. . . .

"Now, that's over. Excuse my making you

wait this way, but I could not leave my patient."

"Did she suffer . . . a great deal?"

"Yes . . . a great deal. . . . But it is all over. And now she is radiantly happy!"

She sounded almost as if she might be a little jealous. . . .

"What about . . . the little one?"

"You may say, 'What about the big one?' He weighs more than nine pounds. Quite a heavyweight!"

"How proud the mother must be!"

Madame Dumont-Dorville shook her head.

"You ought to have seen her awhile ago. . . . She was not proud then! I thought I should have to call the doctor in. . . . Luckily I was able to do it myself, but it was a tough job!"

She smiled and rearranged a piece of lace torn from her blouse.

"You see how we fought! She would not remain quiet! And afterwards she asked me to forgive her . . . As if I did not understand!"

And she looked so understanding. . . .

"But let us talk about you, my child. What can I do for you?"

"For me?"

For a moment I had forgotten myself. . . .

Very much embarrassed, I stammered: "I'd like to know—if—if—"

Her face was quite close to mine. Her eyes were laughing. She completed the difficult question.

"If you are pregnant?"

I answered, "Yes," in a whisper.

"Come," she said, taking hold of my hand.

We went through a series of small passages all full of charming baby talk: "Now, young lady, a nice laugh for mamma." "Cuckoo. . . . There he is! . . ." "Look, up he goes . . . up . . . up . . ."

I am all atremble . . .

I feel as if I were in a paradise full of love. . . .

"Here we are!" said the midwife, pushing a door open.

We went in.

An empty silent room, with very bare white walls, and all the instruments . . .

And I suddenly remembered a hospital room which I saw when I was a child, and my great fear at the sight of all the shining steel instruments, sharp and cold: pincers, scissors, probes . . .

But a motherly voice pulls me out of my reverie: "Get up on that seat, my child. Put your foot there . . . the other here. That's right. . . . Now stretch."

She took off her rings, one by one . . .

Her gesture made me shiver. . . .

"Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you," she added with a delightful smile.

She came nearer. . . .

I blushed . . . But she appeared not to see my shame and gently she began her examination. My tense being was not even aware of it.

Thoughtfully I watched her seeking a holy discovery. . . .

How restful it is to be natural in a world without hypocrisy! Without any false shame I let her do her work.

"Well! Well!" she murmured to herself.

I stood up excitedly. "Well?"

She left my side. Freed, with one bound I got up and I besought her with a gesture.

"Well?"

Quite simply she answered, "Yes."

Everything swam before my eyes. . . . I exclaimed: "Is it possible?"

She misunderstood me: "You are not pleased?"

Without giving me time to answer, her face quite hard, very much changed:

"Don't ask me to help you to get rid of it! I am in favor of motherhood. A woman in my eyes is a real woman only if she is a mother! As for preventing anyone from becoming one I would rather cut off both my hands!"

I protested against her attack:

"Madame, please! . . . To say such a thing to me . . . If you only knew! . . . I wanted it. . . My love wanted this consecration. I would have died if Nature had denied me this happiness. Don't you see that you are wrong in assuming . . ."

Without wishing it—yes, without any volition of my own; or maybe she drew me towards her—I found myself in her arms and I cried like a very sensitive little girl, when I felt her motherly kiss, she, the mother of all who come to her.

She rocked me tenderly, saying gently: "My child, my child, don't be angry with me."

And she added in such a low voice that I could hardly hear her: "You see, I *have never been able to be a mother. . . .*"

V

There he was, the cause of it all.

I stood in the middle of the room watching him, transfixed by my love for him.

He had not heard me coming. He was writing; or rather, dreaming. We all have our dreams . . . His is of a world peopled with the children of his imagination, with whom he plays like an elder brother. How many times have I surprised him with them, laughing aloud or smiling pensively, his eyes shining brightly! . . .

And now this big child has really created. It is very strange and moving. . . . Will he be very proud, with that masculine pride which makes all women smile inwardly? Or will he be astonished by the miracle which is bringing to life his most beautiful dream-child?

I was so impatient to know. I whispered:

"Jean . . ."

How quickly the children of his mind vanished! He was in such a hurry to leave them that it seemed as if he knew that I was bringing him a real child—our love child.

"You! . . . At last! . . ."

His adoration still surprises and thrills me; it has not changed since the first time I laid my head on his shoulders. He shut his eyes —as always—and I felt his kisses caress my forehead . . . I took his enraptured face in my hands and forced him to look at me.

He thought I was being coquettish:

"Yes, you are beautiful . . ."

"No . . . there is something . . ."

My seriousness surprised him. He studied my expression:

"Such eyes! . . . What more happiness can you bring me? Money?"

And suddenly:

"Did we get the lucky number in the lottery, and have we won the million francs prize?"

How well he said that! I could not help laughing.

"Now, naughty little one! Why do you tease me? You know that your love is all the wealth I need! . . ."

I returned his kisses but said nothing.

He begged: "Please, my darling . . . tell me!"

"Guess . . ."

"What can it be?"

He became very curious. He took the lamp and looked carefully at my face. But it did not betray my secret. I wanted him to guess. My love made it necessary that he should. . . . But would he?

The light was no help to him. He put down the lamp and began to kiss me passionately. . . . How clever of him! . . . Did he think his kisses would make me tell? . . . They were so tender, so wonderful . . . Should I weaken?

Suddenly I had an idea, a lover's idea. . . . I answered his kisses with such kisses as he had never had before. They were so fierce, so ardent, that he was taken by surprise and almost stopped kissing me.

For an instant he was puzzled . . . But then inspiration came, and with one final kiss my secret became his.

"He is born!"

Some wonderful change took place in his soul. . . . His expression was reverent and adoring. . . . He seized my hand, pressed it tightly against his heart and said fervently:

"Beloved . . . You have brought our child to life in my heart."

VI

His love has changed. . . .

The lover has become a father. Strangely enough, my father. The child is only a pretext. All the new love born in his heart is given to the mother. He sees only her now; she is so touching a figure that she moves him to a tenderness which will only attain its real object much later. Every man needs a child—especially when he is a rational human being—to bring his fatherly feelings to the front. Motherhood is innate. All women are mothers—to their husbands as well as to their children.

I abandon myself to the new love the father of my child is giving me. It suits me just now. I could not bear any other kind. . . .

Once again he has not lacked in understanding. Our mutual harmony continues. . . .

VII

That precious moment at twilight . . . when one begins to dream in the silence . . .

Strange fairylike shapes took flight from his cigarette and their blue forms mingled with the growing darkness. . . .

My eyelids closed suddenly. . . . My head fell among the cushions as if it had been struck by sleep. . . .

He carefully laid it on the most beautiful cushion. . . . Then he stood beside me until the darkness made it impossible for him to distinguish my features. . . . He thought I was asleep.

He lit one of the smaller lamps and went to the library for a book. What book, I wondered, all my attention being centered upon him. Probably a book by Vallès—he always comes back to that author. I should see in a moment whether I was right. He went back to his desk. I heard the monotonous sound of a paper-knife. Then silence.

Now I might open my eyes. I was sure to be left alone while he was reading. What

book was it? Jacques Vingtras! I knew it. I could see upon his temple the small blue vein I know so well, and could study, without fear of detection, *the face which might be the face of my child.*

My child's face—that had been my first concern, ever since my exaltation at the certainty that I should be a mother had subsided to make room for thoughts of the great responsibilities of motherhood.

Her child's face. . . . How fascinating for a mother to speculate about it! I had been thinking a great deal, trying to imagine what it would be like. I looked at its father's face. . . . How much it meant to me! But I wanted to see it as it *really* was. A long time ago his face had become blurred by our love, for when two people love each other they no longer *see* all. Only little things, such as that small vein!

These little things reveal the beloved better, but are treasures which lovers create and which belong only to them.

Today I had to see his *"real face"*; and I

could because motherhood had given me a keener vision.

He was still reading under the lamplight, and I could study him at my leisure. First his eyes. But his eyelids were lowered and hid them. . . . Only their eyelashes could be seen. His mouth? I love his mouth; it is kind. His forehead? Sometimes, to surprise him, I try to cover it with my hands. Is it beautiful? I love his ears, they are so small.

But is his face beautiful judged as a whole? He says it is dreadful. To tell the truth I think he says that because he thinks that the least trace of beauty in a man detracts from his masculinity.

Often he says: "I am not ugly enough." And he seems to be serious. What a paradoxical mind he has! Fortunately he can't keep my child from having his father's best features. And of course my child will also look like me. At least I ought to know what I look like! I went to my mirror.

"Well! well! You imp! You weren't asleep at all!"

I looked at him and then at myself. . . .

"What are you thinking about?"

"About our child. . . . What kind of face will he have?"

And unhesitatingly he uttered a truth which resolved all my doubts.

"Darling, he will be beautiful, as beautiful as our love."

VIII

The womb! . . .

Where my child begins its life, in the secret depths of my own body. I'd like to see it, if only for an instant. Even if it is shapeless, just a few red ligaments of a body, my maternal heart would stop from happiness. . . . Is that why any woman whose child is born before its time is never allowed to see the little dead thing which is her child?

Since it is impossible for me to fulfil my wish I try to get some indication of its presence which would help me to live while waiting . . .

But I watch in vain for some marvelous revelation. Unless . . . Yesterday I wanted cabbage soup. I had to have it so thick that the spoon would not sink in it. And I ate it gluttonously, just like a peasant woman who has been working in the fields.

Was that the way, perhaps, which my child chose to reveal itself?

IX

Now I should be satisfied.

My suffering has given me the seal I have always wanted for our love.

X

I screamed with pain.

He ran up to me. Ever since I uttered my first cry of pain he has always stayed near me, ready!

"What is the matter?"

"My heart . . . It pains me so . . . If you only knew . . . See!"

I took his hand and pressed it to my heart. It trembled as he touched my tortured body.

"Wait, I shall cure you." And he kissed the spot. . . . "Darling . . ." What can he do? There are some pains, forerunners of the others—the greater pains—which nothing can lessen, not even his love, the balm for all my ills.

Through my torture I saw him doing a thousand puerile things. If I had not been suffering so much, I should have laughed.

It was a dull, deep-seated pain which slowly carried me away, far away from everything, even from him, into a world entirely my own, a world in which I had to fight my own battles unaided. But my mind continued

its separate existence, struggling and revolting against my suffering body. Why should my child cause me this agony? One ought to find in bringing a child into the world physically the reward of one's sacrifice to life. There is an absurdity in that which religious people and scientists will explain, of course, but that dreamers never will accept.

Which is best? To pass through life insensible and sterile, without ever knowing what suffering means—or to suffer and know the Absolute?

Is that the penalty we have to pay?

Let us pay it! My body protests, fever consumes me, but I smile to the Love that is within me.

This is my Credo; it drove away my misery. And I found my reward in the unexpected spectacle of seeing my husband, distraught, religiously pouring drop by drop soup stock, instead of laudanum, on a linseed flour plaster.

XI

While I was absent he went to an old trunk where I hide my treasures, and he got out Précieuse de Mérouville, my doll.

Précieuse is perhaps a hundred years old. She was the daughter of my grandmother, to whom she had been given by her grandmother. Was that ancestress of mine her first mother? No one can tell. But a family tradition gave Précieuse a new mother each time a little girl of the family reached the age of six. Then the old mother took out Mademoiselle Précieuse de Mérouville from her brocaded box—she had been baptized de Mérouville in honor of the owners of the castle in the town—and gave her to her new mother, saying: "My child, you are six today, old enough to be a mother. Here is my own daughter; she is yours now. Play with her, but be careful not to spoil her train. I'll take her away from you tonight."

And from that evening on, nobody ever saw the beautiful doll taken from her box till a new mother was born for that purpose, by

virtue of the old principle that beautiful things must not be spoiled but must be left to die in prisons of our invention.

Précieuse was dying of neglect in the confines of my old trunk, because I am not a little girl any more—whatever my husband may say—and I was waiting for the tiny hands of my child, to bring her back to life.

"Daddy" refused to wait as long as that. He took my old doll out of her prison and did his best to disguise her as a tiny baby. Then he laid her in my child's cradle and pulled the curtains so that the illusion would be complete.

"Daddy" was watching beside his joke waiting for "mamma."

A ring. That's she! He came running to open the door for me.

"I am glad you are here! Do you know I have bought *his* layette! . . ."

I did not notice his mysterious air. I went up to the cradle as in a dream . . . and as I always do I pulled the curtains open . . . And I saw the funny sight. I burst out laughing like a youngster who is amused.

"How funny he is really!"

He had put on the doll my child's little bonnet, front to back naturally! and the veil all rumpled, over her nose spotted by old age. I laughed, I could not stop laughing.

I took the thing in my arms to play up to him. And then I did not laugh any more. . . . Suddenly it seemed to me that it was *my child* I was rocking in my arms.

And we both looked at each other for a long time before falling into each other's arms.

XII

"You are angry with our child? . . . Don't say no, I can see it. . . ."

"No, my darling. Why should I be angry with him? It is not his fault, it is mine really . . ."

"Jean, why should you sadden me? Listen, I am not suffering as much as you think . . ."

We were trying to delude ourselves about the double suffering we had to bear, I in my body and he in his heart!

He looked at me, very pale amongst my pillows, just freed from the perfidious pain which takes hold of me even in his arms.

This pain has become his enemy and, although he dares not say it, his resentment is strong against the one he believes the cause of it. . . .

I can't bear this discovery. He saw it, so at once he began to speak lovingly about my child. His understanding is as great as his heart. . . .

He spoke of him in words which he knew would appeal particularly to my maternal in-

stinct. I listened, forgetting my grief in a delight which he purposely created. And there was so much love in him that it shone through his words.

I looked at him in my turn. How I love him! . . . Never has he been so close to me as at this turning point where the man is judged by the mother. . . .

"It is true, you are not against him. You too adore our child. Think, beloved, our child, the child of both of us . . . Do you also love me?"

It is so pleasant to hear again what one knows by heart . . .

"I love you so much!"

He is always afraid that I may doubt his love. It is touching. . . .

"I love you so much!" In spite of himself he comes back to the thing that is worrying him.

"If I did not love you so much, I would resent your suffering less. Ugly monkey!" he concluded jokingly.

"Ugly monkey! I don't want you to call my dear little one an ugly monkey!"

"Well, am I not your little one any more?"

That's jealousy! I did it on purpose. Should I answer him? But he gave me no time.

"I am afraid you are going to be the weakest of mothers. . . . That will be awful. Later on it will be my turn, otherwise *he* would be impossible to manage."

"How do you know? You don't know his personality."

"Whatever it is to be, he'll need a master; and I," he said sweetly, "shall be that master."

"Master! . . . Master!"

Then a very feminine anger shook me. It made me think of theatrical fights where disheveled mothers stand in the way of implacable fathers. And my anger became intensified.

"Master! . . . Master! . . ."

Calmly he went on:

"At fifteen he will have a strong spirit. Then I shall tell him: 'My boy, you see now

what life is. Try not to suffer too much. Adore your mother, my boy—that's the best thing you can do now. But don't listen too much to her, otherwise you'll never be a man!' "

He had reached the highest point of masculine exultation.

But a thought came to me. . . . I lay in wait with "his boy" and I felt an obscure pleasure in seeing him exult thus. When he stopped at last short of breath, I was ready with one word:

"And if 'your' boy happened to be a girl—what then?"

XIII

I said that without much thought of the consequences, just to have "the upper hand." As soon as I had said it, I was as astonished as he was. . . .

What if it were a girl?

He had spoken of a boy to assert more strongly his future authority. The truth is, we had never wondered before whether our child would be a boy or a girl.

Other mothers and fathers think about that at once. The father wants a girl because he likes women; the mother wants a son to be proud of him; or the reverse, for other reasons which vary according to the people. There are parents whose desire for either is so strong that they decide what sex their child is to be before it is born.

Why did we not feel the same way? We stood opposite each other, deep in thought.

We understood each other. What matter whether our child be boy or girl? He was above all *the child of our love.* He represented our mutual love. His realization in

one sex or another had not worried us especially. This outburst made me suddenly ask:

"Would you rather have a son than a daughter?"

"I have no preferences."

"Neither have I; it seems to me it would not be fair. . . ."

I could only surmise. Let me see: a son? Of course he would love me as his father does. . . . The thought of having another cavalier at my side is very tempting.

A daughter? Well . . . a daughter would always remain with me. All mothers think alike! I found myself one with them.

Had I a preference without knowing it? To begin with, if it were a girl, my husband would have lost the game, and that's a good reason.

XIV

His piercing small eyes looked at my coming from behind the magnifying crystals of his glasses. . . .

One hand lay upon a big microscope. . . . He did not move; he looked as if he had been stolen from a wax museum.

"Well, madame?"

This call to order, as surprising as a miracle, made me feel suddenly the puerility of my visit. How could I ask that question of this great man, chosen expressly for that purpose in the Who's Who?

An indefinable feeling of uneasiness made me move my feet and my hands like an imbecile. . . . "Well, madame?" he said louder, without moving.

I had to say something.

"Sir—Master—you see—I am not ill. . . ."

This unexpected beginning interested him enormously. The statue became animated and he applied his glasses to this curious case: a human being who was not ill.

"You are not ill, madame, you are not ill?"

He seemed to be considering the problem deeply.

"But then would you mind telling me to what I owe the honor of your visit?"

I felt he had adopted this worldly way of talking to make me tell him of some unheard-of defect that he would appreciate. And already I saw the microscope moving under his hand.

Who knows? Perhaps what I came to ask him will open horizons he has never contemplated before.

That idea gave me courage.

"Master, I must tell you that I am pregnant."

"Very well, madame. Very well. And then?" He had no further curiosity.

"I'd like to know whether my child is a girl or a boy."

He let go his microscope. . . .

He looked at me as if I were a little girl. But I am a mother, and my question was a serious one which came from my heart. Why did the old man not feel that?

"I can understand, Master, that my question should appear ridiculous to you. . . . Nevertheless, you'll excuse it when you know that it means an inheritance for my child. . . ."

That was the best I could find for the reluctant doctor.

"That's a good reason, indeed, madame; I can understand your impatience. But it is almost impossible to determine the sex of the child in its mother's womb. The means used up to now are purely empirical."

I besought him with my eyes. . . .

"However, madame, I am willing to try; but I assume no responsibility in case of a disappointment." I was not listening to him any more. I followed him to a case, where he chose, from amongst a lot of strange instruments, a kind of ebony trumpet. . . .

"What is that?" I asked, in spite of myself.

"It is a stethoscope, madame. In other words, a microphone which registers the pulsations of the embryo through the abdominal wall. By the number of pulsations to the

minute one can guess the sex to be male or female. As I have told you, it is very unscientific."

I looked devotedly at the object I had taken to be a trumpet.

"Please, madame, make yourself comfortable. That's enough, thank you."

I stretched myself on a great leather divan.

Suddenly I said: "It should be a girl. . . . At least my old relation wants it so."

"We shall try to find out, madame. In any case you can always expect the contrary of what is told you."

That is a true medical axiom! But he had just applied his stethoscope. He bent down his ear. . . . Then he listened. . . . He moved the instrument about. Suddenly he became quiet.

With his free hand he took a watch from his pocket. His glance riveted on it. He counted, "One—two—three—four—"

"What are you counting, doctor?"

"Hush! . . . Five—six—seven. . . . The beatings of his heart."

"His heart! He has a heart already. . . ."

"Please, madame, remain quiet. If you do not, I shan't be able to answer your question."

I did not move any more. . . . I was thinking to myself about his heart. . . .

The voice had begun counting again. Suddenly it stopped at a figure: "Thirty."

"Madame, it must be a boy."

"A boy. . . . A boy. . . ."

I forgot that my husband had won. I was delighted and wholly preoccupied by this revelation. I stammered, very much moved:

"A boy. . . . A boy!"

It seemed to me that, spiritually at least, I had just brought him out into the world. . . .

XV

"It is a boy; you were right. . . ."

"Are you annoyed that I guessed?"

"No. But I would have liked to . . ."

"We both did, darling. Remember, we never discussed anything but him. It was to tease me that you spoke of a girl."

"It doesn't matter. I wish I had been as sure as you were."

He was very careful not to contradict me. And like a sportsman he added:

"What does it matter, after all! Girl or boy, it is our child." And on those words we made up.

XVI

I have been a long time without any pains.

I am quite surprised.

I had grown accustomed to the irregular suffering. I was waiting for it. I could almost have predicted the exact minute it would seize me; it was like a kind of telepathy within myself.

It seemed to me as if it were never coming back. . . .

Something has changed within me. I couldn't express it, it is a new feeling. . . . And this new state alarmed me more than it relieved me. I had made this lost suffering a part of me by studying myself, stoically analyzing everything. I was resigned to it.

Now that it has left me, what will happen to me?

I went about uneasily, day after day, waiting for the unknown. Sometimes I looked as wicked as some wild animal, at other times I had the appealing face of a little girl.

XVII

I tried to get away from my bugaboo. I took *his* small things from their chest. . . .

How puerile a mother's joy is! To be able to play with those tiny things is like playing with all the apparel of a marvelous doll of whom you alone know the secret. . . .

Each of the little garments brought back a vision on which my heart dwelt fondly. . . . In a cascade of lace I could see the wrinkled face of the old woman—she too wore a bonnet, a walking advertisement of her shop. Leaning over the things I was examining, she would say: "See, how well it would suit her little face, how well it would fit his tiny wee feet." A whole lot of little things which proved the old lady to have been successful as a saleswoman.

. . . And in the evening, though it was late, I forgot myself in the contemplation of a mechanical doll holding out her arms in a shop window surrounded by her tiny wardrobe. . . . My eyes feasted on so many delightful things.

I dreamed of all the treasures my love had thought out for him, my child. . . . I went to their hiding place. Slowly I pushed the panel open. . . . What a beautiful coat! Do you remember how proud I was of it? You found the picture of it in an old parchment book where people were shown in their gala clothes, and you thought that the coat made for a royal child was hardly good enough for the shoulders of your own.

My enchanted fingers have reproduced it, but made it more magnificent even than the model.

Do you remember? . . .

And tirelessly I have gone back to its hiding place; shutting my eyes, I can feel the precious odor which comes from it, a love perfume born of all the flowers of spring. . . .

Like a communicant, I took out a long robe, as long as a bride's veil, which scattered real flowers as I unfolded it. . . .

That's the dress I want him to wear as soon as he is born.

The room was thick with people created

out of my love. . . . They seemed to crowd around me that I might give them soul. . . . Alas! I do not even believe in the existence of the soul! . . .

Dear little one, *"are you"* really? My soul must give you life since my dream can live only among your tiny garments.

I took up your dress again! How beautiful it is! How will it look, when you wear it?

Absorbed, I put my hand into the sleeve; I seemed to have one small finger at the end of an empty wrist, and I bent my arm as if *he* were going to suck his thumb. . . .

"Oh!"

"What is the matter? . . . Darling . . . answer me! You are quite white . . . and all those things around you. . . . What does it mean? . . . Answer me, please. . . . Why don't you move?"

"So that our child may move again. . . ."

XVIII

I looked all the time as if I were expecting something. . . .

At last I went to his beautiful dress, which I had taken from its hiding place; it had become a fetish for me.

I picked it up and mechanically I put my hand in the sleeve. I made my hand look like a small finger at the end of an empty wrist, and I bent *his* arm as if *he* were going to suck his thumb. . . .

Then I waited expectantly.

I waited in vain.

Unsatisfied, I put the fetish aside, doubting its virtue. Melancholy I walked, from room to room. The sun, following me, seemed to mock me. . . .

Suddenly I saw Rintintin. . . . I had forgotten my confidant! I went up to his ear—a monstrous ear like that of a Chinese grotesque. His ear is as big as a sign. As soon as I saw it, I chose its possessor as the recipient of all my daily troubles. I confided my sorrows to him. . . . Then I gave him a

push on his moving head and at once he agreed with me and I felt happier. . . .

Good Rintintin. . . .

"Ah!"

The Chinese idol had escaped me and lay broken on the floor. . . .

Delighted, I smiled: *my son had moved again.*

Bliss made me stay still as if I were tied to a cross of delights.

Life woke me from my dream. Then I picked up my plaything that I had broken. . . . Its wide-open ear offered its services still. . . . I took it up without any remorse and joined it to what remained of the unhappy Rintintin. I made a small altar which I left in the spot where this new happiness had come to me.

I forbade anyone to touch them.

There were altars like that one all over my house and their number increased every day. . . . My love for my child increased with them. . . .

XIX

Devotion is not enough any more. I want my God! I am like the communicant who approaches for the first time the God who is to be hers. Yet, unlike her, I'd like to take out of myself this god who chose me for his sanctuary. . . . I want to hold him . . . to press him passionately upon my bosom, to enjoy him with my soul and my senses, to see him cry, to see him laugh and to kiss him!

Above all to kiss him. That's how I'll begin, instinctively, just like an animal licking its young. What torture it is not to have him! . . . I am crying. Yes, I am crying. I, the rebel, now that I am powerless. . . .

XX

I am watching for his awakening. . . .

He has been sleeping such a long time in his carriage surrounded with veils, just like a dream Jesus amongst the clouds. . . .

I told his mother how beautiful he was, and at once she made room for me on the humble bench in the park. . . . I listened to her speaking about him, about a world of simple things that nobody knows anything about except mothers, dreamily looking at the newly born. A circle of small angels came to surround the carriage of the young god. And I saw the sun shining divinely upon their fair heads. . . . One of them cuddled in my lap and thirstily I put my arms around him. . . . Two flowerlike eyes seemed to ask a question. . . . I saw then the long hair floating in the wind. . . . It was a girl. . . . I thought of my boy, my boy. . . . Is the sensation the same? And suddenly I opened my arms. . . . The little one, frightened, ran away uttering a cry. . . . And I fell into my contemplation again. . . . How he slept! . . . A sunbeam

danced upon his cheek. . . . Heavens! It struck his eyes!

Baby made a face and began to cry. . . . "Now, he awakes! Look, madame!" With one bound she was standing. Her face changed, became like a child's, like the one over which she was bending. . . . Did he recognize himself in her face? He stopped crying and smiled. . . .

"Good morning, sir! Who had a nice, nice sleep? He had! . . . Now, laugh nicely for your own mamma. . . . There! . . . Once more. Oh! What a love he is, my darling little man!"

"He is really a little man?"

"Of course. His name is Benedict. A beautiful name. I chose it in a novel. . . ."

He was a boy. . . . I had known it all the time, yet I did not dare ask, I was so afraid to be disillusioned. . . . A boy . . . like mine . . . like the one I have not got yet. . . .

"Look, madame, his carriage is all wet. Naughty, naughty! And he smiles after such a terrible crime!"

She took him up lovingly, she held him close to her heart with her eyes closed.

Be quiet, my jealous heart! You know he is not yours. . . . I wanted to have him in my arms as she had, I wanted to taste this unknown joy, I had to be cunning. . . . Could I forget?

I had to use cunning, so I insinuated suddenly: "Aren't you afraid that he will catch cold, wet as he is?"

"It is very warm today, but I am going to change him. . . ."

And while she sat down, still holding him tightly, I exclaimed again:

"He is a beautiful child!"

"Isn't he! Though he has no hair yet to speak of."

"But . . ."

"Here, look. . . ."

"Yes, he has hair. One does not see it because it is fair."

The mother was delighted.

"Do you want me to hold him for you while you unfold the clean diaper."

"No, thank you very much. . . . Please don't trouble. . . ."

How cruel she was! She did not want to be separated from him. Could she not see my bitter envy?

She stretched a cloth upon her knees, then she unswaddled her baby. He laughed. What an adorable laugh! I would have loved to kiss his laugh. . . . He was naked and his tiny body seemed to laugh too with all its dimples in the sun. The mother was expecting me to admire him. I had an inspiration. I made a face.

"How thin he is! I would have thought him fatter. . . ."

"Fatter! But he couldn't possibly be!"

I did not pay any attention to what she said and went on as though to myself:

"He can't weigh very much. . . ."

"You are very much mistaken," a vehement voice answered. "Take him and you'll see."

At last I had him in my arms.

"Well, what have you to say now? Do you think he is heavy enough?"

Who was speaking of weight? I only knew of one weight—that in my heart. It made me feel faint—

"You are quite pale, madame. . . . What is the matter?"

Oh, incredible sensation on my breast! Oh, profound illusion of my deceived senses!

"Give him back to me!"

I had felt that it was my own little one I was holding in my arms . . . my own. . . . Two hands tore him from me. Stupidly I looked at this other mother on the defensive. . . . She was also very pale. . . . She stared at me relentlessly. . . .

I stammered, not knowing what to say:

"It is true, he is quite heavy . . . very heavy. . . ."

And I went away quite despondent under the double weight that oppressed me. . . .

XXI

I sat with a calendar . . . June 25th. Not before. . . . It is marked in blue pencil with a big cross which forms a halo upon the name of Saint Prosper. Is Saint Prosper the saint of pregnant women?

I destroyed the mark with a blot of ink as deep as the revolt of my soul. . . .

And, deliberately, I made another cross on the first of the month.

XXII

The sacred month. . . . A week of it was almost gone. My child was not born yet. . . . And I smiled when I thought of the revolt which made me provoke Time so childishly. My maternal impatience must submit to Time like all human impatience. Yet is there a more poignant impatience than that of a mother who is expecting a child? . . . How full of things this waiting is! . . .

I tried to forget it by making sudden resolutions to go out, and in interesting myself in little things, in the sententious gossips, all those small things that are everything to some women and which I had thought impossible.

Alas! I could not live with myself any longer. . . . Where were the days which used to be filled with the sunshine of my thoughts? Those who know the happiness of being able to realize their mental dreams will understand my distress and my isolation. . . .

I was condemned to live through others. I should have liked to take an interest in their cares; to make them mine, and thus have the

illusion of a little happiness. . . . I could not even do that. . . .

Will the sad inferiority of the woman who accomplishes the highest thing in life ever be known?

Even her gestures are those of a child. Like a child, she needs the help of grown-ups. She does not always get it. . . . The divine weakness of a pregnant woman should be considered. She should be praised like a lost religion and her sense of shame—last relic of her woman's soul—should not be outraged in being looked at as if she were a curiosity.

XXIII

"Spiritual vase . . .
"Ivory Tower . . .
"Mystical Rose . . .
"Virginal Mother. . . ."

Those are the only verses which celebrate this symbol of life. . . . That is because the Holy Mother dwells in the Dream of poets: The Virgin. It seems to be a condition of their ideal. Is it because motherhood appears too human to them? Have they not seen God's handiwork in the fact itself?

To have fulfilled the purpose of the Divine is to be nearer to it. . . . I was thinking today that the poet of poets on earth would have been a mother, if she had remembered that and celebrated it. . . .

I have tried in my humble way to transcribe the emotions felt by all women who are going to give birth to a child. Can they remember their astonishment at the mystery of which they were the witnesses, and which made them so irremediably silent? The body

of the woman who is going to become a mother. . . . Those two lives in one. . . . The terror which seizes one at the thought of it, or only when the strange phenomenon manifests itself before one. . . .

I was stretched among the cushions in this hollow which I did not leave any more. . . .

Suddenly I threw my head backwards, my throat tightened, I could not breathe, and my hands clutched my bosom.

He rushed to me. . . . It was over. . . . And I smiled, full of maternal love at this new prank of my child.

A great need of seeing him took hold of me . . . and, modestly, I uncovered myself. . . .

He was arching his back and he was quite visible under the skin as tight as a net. It looked as if he wanted to stand up. . . .

I felt as if I were going to burst!

The father made a movement of horror! Baby, pleased with his prank, turned a somersault, leaving his parents quite amazed. Now, he was all on one side, strangely. . . . I tried

to go to sleep to put him to sleep too; but it was not his hour yet, he protested, his fist tight against my heart. Dear little fist. . . . I tried to hold it!

Agile, it disappeared, and my angry son jumped furiously about, doubtless trying to punish his mother for this anticipatory gesture.

A mother's body, such a sad body, tortured, tossed, pulled about, beaten; it is extraordinary, it frightens and makes one think. . . .

How powerless the lover feels and how he suffers! . . . And yet the mother lays her hands devotedly upon the cruel child playing cup and ball with her heart, scratching her being with subtle claws, with the delightful sensation that the more obnoxious he is, the nearer he is to being delivered from her body. . . .

XXIV

Blood! . . . Blood!

Terrified, I sat up in bed.

In the mirror I saw a little girl in her long nightgown and with her hair down. She held out her arms to me to ask my help.

Where had I seen that little girl before?

In my mind I saw in a far-away vision—far away and yet so near—my puberty revealing itself suddenly. It was the same puerile astonishment and the same terror. Today, I know, and yet my terror exists still. I see in the blood which flows again the announcement of my new consecration. I am afraid. . . . Afraid of that which is hanging over me and of which I am ignorant. . . .

To know what is coming—to be saturated with its knowledge so that one can wait for it with a strong soul and body.

I went to my books, as numerous as the multiple combinations of a prism—all the Thought of the world is in those reliquaries. I read, especially, books by women, to find out about the secret which belongs only to us,

that secret that no masculine thought has ever fathomed or has ever been able to render through imagination.

I turned page after page. I found nothing. Nothing but love in all its aspects, ugly or beautiful, vile or great. But of the marvelous fruit of love, itself, nothing. I found nothing. . . .

Since the first child was born, not one mother has ever consented to uncover the mystery. I was greatly astonished. Was it incapability? However little they could have shown to future mothers, it would have helped them to face this unknown with less fear. . . .

Was it some curious modesty? I could not imagine it. I left the useless books. My thoughts went back to the enigmatic body which has defied analysis, and which, without shock or suffering, begins relentlessly its great work.

I fixed my mind on that spot of blood like a Gipsy bending over her *tarot* cards seeking her destiny.

XXV

Night is falling. . . .

Lights were born outside and surprised me still poring over the problem there in the darkness. . . . He caught me thus and remained still also. . . . We said nothing, hardly daring to look at each other.

More anguishing silence . . . until he at last broke the spell. . . .

"That's enough! I can't let you stay like that any more. Get up. I am going to take you to the doctor. He'll tell us . . . yes . . . he'll tell us . . . Hurry, get up!"

He spoke as a master with an expression I had never seen on his face before.

I obeyed him. . . .

I dressed with slow and clumsy movements. . . . And I was astonished at the sweetness almost like consecration he brought to my help while he went on imperiously:

"Go on, hurry, you must hurry, you know!"

I was ready. I looked like a poor thing who was going to be taken she knew not where.

Suddenly I said:

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the doctor's."

"I won't go!"

He looked at me. . . . He did not know the cause of my sudden revolt. . . . And then I thought about two hands, two capable, helping hands.

I whispered a name:

"Madame Dumont-Dorville. . . . I want to go to her."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain on the way. Let us go!"

I was the one who gave orders then. He followed me, subdued by a will stronger than his. Outside, unconscious of the rain, I talked . . . I talked . . . I unveiled for him this world unknown to men: the world of motherhood. I told him how I had discovered it, one day, incarnated in a woman to whom Nature had refused a child, doubtless to make of her its priestess. This belief was bringing me back to her at the supreme moment. . . .

The rain beat against our faces, close to

each other. . . . I was walking so quickly that he had to stop me. . . .

"Here we are!"

But I could not see the sign with her name any more. . . . I was probably mistaken. I asked all the people who passed, as if they could know! . . . They hardly answered me, hurrying as they were under the pouring rain. . . .

He worried.

"You are going to catch cold. I beg you, take shelter under that door. I'll go—"

I stopped him, exclaiming:

"But it is here! I was not mistaken. I recognize the concierge behind her glass door. But why is the sign not there any more?" My joy was so great that this detail did not stop me.

"Come quickly! Now, I know. It is on the first floor. She is the only one. . . . Come! . . ."

I threw bribes of sentences at him while going feverishly up the stairs.

The landing was quite dark.

Out of breath, I leaned against the wall, listening. . . . But no newly born cry welcomed me.

I rang. . . . How slow she was in coming! . . . At last I heard steps. They came nearer . . . but so slowly. . . .

The door opened. . . . An old woman with a quivering voice asked:

"You want?"

"Madame Dumont-Dorville . . . if you please?"

"My dear young lady, she is not here any more. . . . She is dead." And the old woman remained still with her head thrust forward, her glasses almost falling off her nose. . . .

She repeated:

"She is dead!"

He pressed me tenderly against him . . . and to stop the old woman, he said:

"All right. . . . All right. . . ."

Quite intrigued, she settled her glasses upon her nose and lifted her head full of curiosity:

"You knew her probably? She was a nice

person. . . . I took her apartment. Mine was above and was not so nice. No, certainly not, it was not so nice. So you knew her? . . . I went to her funeral. . . . A beautiful funeral. . . . She was a very nice person. She died of a miscarriage. Think of it, a midwife who dies of a miscarriage, it is—"

She stopped, not daring to say the word, so I finished it for her with a peculiar smile:

"It is funny."

"Isn't it, though?" went on the old woman, not understanding. "What did you want? I might be able to give you the information you seek."

I let her talk to my husband, and for myself alone, I repeated the awful word, the comical word, that *ad patres* for her who lamented her sterility as nothingness itself, and who could create only her own death. . . .

"It is funny . . . it is funny. . . ."

"Let us go, my love. Come! Thank you, madame. I'll take her to that Home . . . thank you. . . ." And he took me away with-

out hearing the last recommendations of the old woman leaning over the banister:

"It is a very nice home. . . . The price is rather high. . . . But the people are very nice . . . very nice . . . very nice. . . ."

XXVI

"You don't think I am going to die?"

"Foolish child! There is no reason why you should die because that woman died. How foolish! Listen to me . . . Will you listen to me! Madame Dumont-Dorville died of a miscarriage"—he dwelt as much as possible on the first word—"do you hear? Of a miscarriage!"

"Some die of child-bearing! . . ."

"That's a fixed idea! You pain me . . . you pain me greatly—" His voice broke.

Mechanically I turned my head towards him. His face showed in relief against the dark background of the automobile. He was quite changed by the torture that I was inflicting upon him. But I couldn't help it. I was absolutely the prey of that idea: that in creating one can die. . . . I even went so far as to believe that one "must" die, that it is necessary, that Nature demands it. . . . She demands it. . . . Fabre says so. How many creatures pay for their procreating instinct with death. It is agony in childbirth

and inevitable death. All mothers must die. . . . I am going to die! How was it that he did not feel that? I was full of hatred for his composure. . . . He was full of despair. But he was not suffering enough—he would never suffer as much as I!

"I am going to die . . . I am going to die. . . ."

"Please stop . . . stop, wicked child. Look at all those women who go about with their children. Did they die? Look at that little boy, down there . . . how lovely he is. Look how lovely he is in his mother's arms. . . ."

But I didn't want to see anything, I didn't want to hear anything. I repeated, stubborn and grim:

"I am going to die . . . I am going to die. . . . Already I feel ill. . . ."

"It is this frightful jolting!"

He broke the window:

"For God's sake, don't go so fast!"

Amazed, the chauffeur turned around. He saw me lying upon the seat, his eyes opened

in astonishment . . . and I believe he made his machine go faster. . . .

"Oh, Jean, he is going faster. . . ."

Desperate, he took me in his arms, trying to protect me from the jolts; but I was too much for him and we fell back heavily in the corner. With great care he left me and with a violent gesture he opened the door of the taxi. Holding on to the lantern, a foot swinging, he shouted to the man words that were carried away by the wind. I heard, half-consciously:

". . . so quickly . . . brute! . . . A woman . . . going to . . . carriage . . . kill you . . . you'll see! . . ."

But the chauffeur did not mind either insults or threats. Bent upon his wheel, he had one thought only, and that was to be rid of such passengers as quickly as possible.

And we went faster still, carried in a frantic race with death. I was not frightened by the danger. . . . Houses, people, lights, ran to meet us and to crush me.

Quite prepared for it, I awaited death. . . .

His lips touched mine. . . . A human sweetness filled my heart. . . . My love . . . With his kiss he resurrected me! I didn't want to die any more. . . . I clung desperately to him. . . . I implored him to save me. I didn't know what I was saying. . . . I lost my head completely. . . . Suddenly I burst out sobbing, nestling on his shoulder. . . .

"My own, my little one, you are yourself again. . . ." And his tears mingled with mine. . . .

We arrived thus, locked in each other's arms, and very woeful, at the Home.

And at once the chauffeur left his seat. He opened the door and hastened to help me to get out. . . . I saw, in the light of his lantern, heavy drops of sweat falling from his thick eyebrows. . . .

He appeared not to see the angry look of the "husband," nor the deliberate smallness of his tip. Freed from his double load, he went away whistling victoriously after having with one look reassured himself about the state of the inside of his taxi.

XXVII

Peace. . . .

There was a deep peace all around which astonished and frightened us a little. . . .

Where were we? In the country? We could smell flowers in the night air. . . .

A train spurted out, suddenly, close to us. We drew back. And I was hypnotized by its white smoke which trailed behind. . . . It lighted the landscape. I could see small houses with tiled roofs and trees and hedges. . . .

"How pretty it is here! . . ."

"Yes. . . . But where is the Home?"

I was not thinking any more about it. . . .

We were so comfortable suddenly in the night, at peace in these surroundings I could not see any more, but which I could guess at.

He grew annoyed, grumbling:

"Damned chauffeur! He has left us anywhere. . . . The damned scoundrel! If I had him here. . . . And one can't see anything! . . ."

Unexpectedly the moon appeared.

"Oh, look at the statue of the Virgin. It looks like an apparition!"

"A statue? An apparition? Where?"

"There, on that roof. . . ."

"That's 'Our Lady of the Angels'! . . . So we are there. Well, after all, the rascal left us at the right place. Come, my darling."

I did not wait for his invitation. I felt drawn towards that Virgin. . . . And while the gate bell rang through the calm of evening, I fixed my eyes upon her. It seemed to me as if I were seeing again Saint Gertrude, the patron saint of my childhood. . . . She was a plaster-cast fairy who performed miracles in the convent where I was brought up. I had secretly adopted her as my mother. . . . When I was very unhappy, I used to go to "my mother Gertrude. . . ." She was a fairy, of that there was no doubt, since she used to console me. . . .

Now she had come back to me to relieve my unhappiness, and, just as long ago, I felt my heart lighter and the joy of living mine again.

"How happy I am, my love!"

He had no time to be astonished at my sudden change of heart. The gate had opened. . . . A cornet, a light, a saintly face. . . .

No word of explanation, nothing except an arm which encircled my waist like the arm of a real sister. And we went along in the quiet, almost unreal night . . . so full of perfumes that I wanted very much to stop to gather flowers and to take them into the maternal sanctuary waiting for me.

"Rest," she said to me with an ineffable smile. Then the Sister sat down herself, but not until with a gesture free from all earthly vanity, she had carefully lifted her woman's dress away from her man's shoes.

"Are you suffering much, my child?"

"No, Sister."

"No. . . . Well, I must tell you we only take patients here when their time has come."

In order to lessen the pitilessness of such an edict, she added quickly:

"There are so many mothers who are waiting to be delivered. . . ."

I told her about my recent discovery.

"Then it will be soon," she concluded. "I am going to take you to the Marie-Madeleine room."

She looked for a key amongst the bunch at her belt, more imposing than a locksmith's.

"That's the only vacant one, all the others are occupied. . . ."

She smiled and her eyes looked to heaven. . . . Did the thought of all the small angels being born in her domain exalt this bride of Christ? I don't know. . . . Her arm took mine, warding off my husband's without saying a word. . . .

We walked along corridors where night lights were like halos above sleeping cornets. The cornets were lifted as we passed, uncovering childish faces. They were the Sisters on watch. One of them rose like a soldier as we neared the door which she guarded like the antechamber of Paradise. . . . I read on the door: Marie-Madeleine.

"Come in," said the Sister, standing aside to let me pass. She followed me, paying no

attention to my companion. . . . She put on the light.

I exclaimed:

"But there is only one bed. . . . Where is my husband going to sleep?" The Sister blushed. Astonishment showed under her cornet. Jean came forward:

"You must excuse the child, Sister, she doesn't know. . . ."

He spoke to me:

"Darling, I can't stay there."

"Why not?"

"Why not? . . . Because it can't be done. Listen . . . I'll come back tomorrow . . . early. . . ."

"You are going to leave me? I am going to stay alone?"

I didn't care that the Sister was horrified, I didn't care that she stayed there immovable, her saintly face showing her disapprobation. I really didn't care! My love had nothing to do with ordinary earthly things. I knew nothing except that He was going away and that death would then begin for me. . . .

"Jean, don't go away!"

He hesitated. . . . He would have liked to take me in his arms and rock me as he had done before. . . . But the Sister was there looking fixedly at him. . . . He didn't care. . . . He looked like a culprit as he stammered:

"One must be reasonable, my l—" He swallowed the rest under the eyes of his judge. "One must be reasonable . . . when one is going to be a mother. . . . The little one will keep you company soon. . . . But I'll come back every day, you know, and I'll be here all the time!"

But the Sister: "Visitors are only allowed from six to seven." And having suddenly come back to life, she started making the bed, throwing the sheets towards the intruder as if she were sending him away. . . .

My beloved . . . My own love, so tender . . . so thoughtful. There you represented "Man," the demon who is the cause of birth of all the angels in her house. Your presence under this roof was sacrilegious to her!

Let him go away! . . . Let him disappear for good! And let God's work only remain. . . . It is the awful ostracism of a religious mind. . . . God was nearer to me in my human weakness than he was to you, Sister, my poor sister. . . . You see he is my god on earth—did you know that we must all have one, God himself has willed it so!—he is mine. . . . So he would not leave me, because he ought not to, especially then. . . .

"Jean, you are going to stay, aren't you? Or else I'll leave with you!"

The Sister came up to us; with one look she made us part, so superior to us in her mission that she made us doubt truth itself. And he went away—without my finding the strength to keep him—with tears in his eyes, blushing. . . .

XXVIII

. . . Then, her face at peace, she turned to the crucifix above my bed. . . . I saw her lips moving. . . . Then she took my fingers in hers and mentally gathered me to her. . . . Slowly her pale cloistered hand pulled the curtains modestly around my "boarder's bed." . . . I did not hear her steps marching away in spite of her heavy shoes. I only heard the door as it closed. . . .

And it was as if the present had shut itself upon me. . . . My sorrow, ready to burst out, disappeared. . . . I forgot myself. . . . It was a subtle and absolute prostration. . . .

Another being possessed me. I recognized her! Had she ever left me? That's also me, that lonely child in her bed at the boarding-school. Like a grown-up person she is frightened by her isolation. How she would love to put her arms around someone who would love her, or that she could love, were it only a doll! But she has no doll. . . . Had not Sister Théotime just pulled the curtains so

that she might be lonelier still? Her thoughts follow the nun through the dormitory; pulling, with a mechanical gesture, a veil over each mute little face. . . .

Her duty accomplished, Sister Théotime returns to her place, beside the night light. . . . She takes up the pieces of linen she hems every night—rough and white, just like her. . . .

I saw again, on my curtains, her arm in shadow, moving forward and back. . . . What a fright! I stood in my bed speechless, fearing more than anything else wise and cold words. . . . I pulled open the curtains a little. Leaning out towards the beds of my companions, I tried to hear their calm and reassuring breathing; but there was only a dramatic silence. . . . Had they all died from terror? . . . I did not want to die! Because I knew that a day would come when I should not be frightened by things or by life any more, because there would be someone there. . . . Someone who would love me . . . I believed that with the touching faith of the solitary child. . . . And I waited, fervently, with

my hands clasped. . . . And the colors changed before my wide-open eyes, the pale light of day chased away the awful shadows, the night light was out, Sister Théotime's arm was not bewitched any more, and I shared in nothing of what was going on, obstinately waiting for a heaven my childish soul knew existed somewhere. . . .

XXIX

"Here he is! . . . Here he is! I knew it. How long have you been in coming to me! . . . I have been waiting for you for such a long time. . . . But I knew you would come!"

He did not pay any attention to my extravagant words. He came up to my bed, and with a nervous gesture he pulled the curtains aside. Then he remained at a standstill as though hypnotized by something. . . . His lips muttered:

"He is still there?" Whom was he talking about? In spite of myself, I followed his eyes and I saw myself, enormous, under the covers. . . .

The thought of my child returned to me. A great happiness thrilled me:

"My little one!"

I was myself again, having found him, my husband.

"My little one. . . . It is true, you are still there, within me. How did I forget him? You did not forget him, did you, dear?"

He paid no attention to my exclamation. He repeated: "*He* is still there. . . ."

Why did he look so disappointed?

I did not dare ask the question. A subtle instinct prevented me from doing so. . . . Why was he not happy if the thought of our little one was with him all the time? What did he regret? Did he want me to be confined that night? What was the reason? . . . An idea came to me, but I did not want to have it! I thought that he wanted it to be over so that my sufferings would be at an end. That was it. I saw in that concern of his for me the constant thoughtfulness which is one of the dearest forms of his love. . . .

"My beloved, how thoughtful you are! . . . Don't be afraid, my child is not going to do me any harm, he must feel how much I love him. . . . Don't be afraid."

Surprised, he listened to me. Suddenly he blushed and he hid his shame in my arms. I crooned over him like a mother, telling him as a story my sleepless night spent in waiting for him.

"Now, I am going away, do you hear! I'll face the Sister, if necessary!"

I got out of bed painfully. I went to the closet where I saw her putting away my clothes yesterday. I took them in a bunch.

"Help me quick and let us get away!"

A young Sister came in just at that point. She looked like an angel. The white veils of her sleeves were folded like two wings. . . . Her seraphic fingers brought a tray from which some steam rose as if it were incense. . . . Her eyelids were lowered.

"Here is your breakfast."

She said it as a formula and raised her eyes. . . . "What, you are up?"

Her eyes were blue. I was sure of it! They tried to be as severe as the eyes of the other Sisters, but without success. It was very amusing. I answered the little Sister:

"Yes, I got up."

And confidentially, in a lower tone:

"I told my husband to take me away from that night Sister. Between ourselves, I believe she is Satan itself!"

The young nun was so startled that she nearly upset her tray. Tremblingly she laid it upon the bed. After that she crossed herself, muttering:

"Our Mother Jesus-Christ! . . . Satan!"

And she crossed herself again.

"She is a saint. . . . For more than twenty years she has spent her nights caring for our sick. . . . In the daytime she shuts herself up to pray and sleeps a little. . . . She is a saint. . . ."

I stopped smiling. . . .

I felt myself growing cold all over. I saw again the enigmatic face of the night before. . . . Twenty years without having seen the sun, either the sun of heaven or that of things! . . . Twenty years! A whole life. . . . That woman must indeed be a saint. . . .

"Excuse me, Sister, I was joking. . . . I wanted to go away because I don't feel any pains, and that Mother Jesus-Christ"—I hardly dared pronounce her name—"has told me about your customs. I'll come back when the moment has come."

Quite upset, the young Sister was holding me by the arm.

"Don't go away! . . . It is forbidden! . . . The rules don't allow it!"

She was quite upset by my disregard of the rules. She hastened to explain:

"You must have the midwife's permission. I will get her to come and see you. . . . But please don't go away. Stay there."

She ran away quickly, but she locked the door carefully so I couldn't escape. Jean and I were looking at each other. We had both the same idea: there was the window!

But our jailer came back accompanied by a woman with an energetic face and quick eyes full of dancing lights. . . . When one looked at her closely, she appeared to be laughing. . . .

"What is this I hear, young lady? You want to leave us almost as soon as you arrive?"

She exchanged an amused smile with my husband. I, alas, was thinking about Mother Jesus-Christ. . . .

The midwife, understanding the psychol-

ogy of women, must have seen that, since she added very seriously:

"Of course, it is rather gloomy here, especially at night. . . . But you'll see, you'll come back to find happiness!"

What a charming woman! She made me think of Madame Dumont-Dorville, and I trusted myself to her, sure to find peace. . . .

"It is your first child, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. . . . I don't believe it is imminent. . . . And walking will make your delivery easy. . . . But, young lady, I wouldn't let you go if you weren't a *primipare.*"

A *primipare?* What was that? It sounded like the name of a monstrous animal. . . . A *primipare!* After all, I didn't care and I used it as an excellent excuse:

"But as I am a primipare!"

"Yes, that's true! All right, young lady," she concluded, making a gesture as if she were blessing me, "you may go!"

It did not take me long to avail myself of

her permission. I put my hat on my head without looking at a mirror—where was my coquetry gone?—I put my gloves into my pocket and without any regret I left the Marie-Madeleine room, where on the tray of the young Sister, who was an angel again, the lovely-smelling tea gave forth its aroma, surrounded by tempting slices of bread and jam. . . .

XXX

And we went to an hotel! The hotel, refuge of traveling salesmen, tourists, exiled lovers. . . . To an hotel, when I ought to have been safely within the walls of Our Lady of the Angels waiting for the great event! . . . But it was written that nothing was to happen to us, or be done by us, according to the rules of common sense. We were in that hotel so that we should be near the Maternity Home without being there; it was a subtle excuse we gave ourselves. The nearness of the Home seemed oppressive to us. Who knew what might happen to us far away from that house we dreaded so much and yet which was so necessary to us? The guests could have had no doubt as to why we were there. Their astonishment amused me. I felt as if I were there for a wager. . . .

After breakfast we went through the hall. Two children were there, a little boy and a little girl. She wore a bonnet of heavy lace which framed her pretty face. Her eyes were of the childish blue which is almost mauve.

Hungrily, I thought her pretty. I had forgotten the boy. I had to remember the one who was going to be born to me, to free myself from the feminine attraction that a little girl has for us women. . . .

He looked like a little man already, with his soldier's cap. He was commanding his sister in enigmatic tasks under the happy and contented eyes of their mother. . . . It was a picture of perfect harmony which charmed us and chained us there. . . . But in a moment they went away, and it was as if something had been taken away from us. . . . We looked at each other. . . . A feeling of exasperated impatience mixed with apprehension came over us. We both felt it although no word was said. . . . And suddenly he proposed that we should go out. Yes, go out to enjoy the illusion of being outside ourselves, our human condemnation to await the unknown which may be beyond our strength and courage. . . . We went off at random. We were at the edge of Parisian civilization near the fortifications. A tramp philosopher with a hole in the seat of

his trousers was dreaming stretched in a ditch. . . . Housewives, with their hair in an old-fashioned knot on the top of their heads, were gossiping, knitting under the kind shade of anemic trees. Unattached animals took their way to unknown destinations . . . like us, they went on, without knowing where, in search of emotions. . . . The landscape was changing gradually. . . . Houses were all of one floor, there were still some shops: a second-hand furniture dealer, a bar, and a wreath-merchant. . . . Then there were no more houses, only huts, Gipsy caravans, old railway carriages. . . . An almost unbelievable camping ground . . . Beyond, in a red vapor which seemed to hover all over this zone, was a desert. . . . It was exceedingly hot. . . . We met no one any more. . . . Only from time to time an urchin would laugh from behind the boards of a fence . . . And we thought of our friend Poulbot and the urchins he writes about. At a crossroad we found a cemetery. . . . It looked like a town of rich people amongst all the poverty around . . .

The whiteness of the crosses glimmered under the sun. . . . We did not feel any of the superstitious animosity that might have seized other people; on the contrary we felt drawn to it. It was a place apart just as we were, at that moment.

We entered the cemetery. . . . And as soon as we had entered it we broke the silence that had fallen between us since we had left the hotel. We talked feverishly—we needed speech. We were thinking of one thing only and yet the usual thing happened, we spoke of everything else under the sun.

Surrounded by nothingness, with its fear in our hearts, we discussed the future heatedly. . . . I wanted, I remember this detail well, a house in the country where we could love and dream and forget. . . . Without care for the obvious impossibility of such a dream being realized, I wanted a magnificent house above woods and fields, with a tulip garden . . . I had to have tulips! I was telling Jean over and over again that tulips I must have, but he was not listening to me, he was talking

about a study for himself, far from human joys *which are really too cruel.* . . . He repeated this sentence several times without explaining his thought more clearly. . . . We were sitting side by side upon a stone bench. Night was falling. . . . Abruptly we became silent, I saw only one name written upon a tomb . . . I must have been looking at it unconsciously for a long time when I became suddenly aware of it:

Marie - Anne - Fabulet

It took possession of my soul as if it had been another soul. . . . It became a face, an extraordinary face with two eyes, only two eyes very sad and very gentle. . . . These wide-open eyes closed. . . . And I saw once more upon the stone in engraved letters, the mysterious name, the haunting name:

Marie - Anne - Fabulet

I have never been able to forget that strange

dream on a cemetery bench in the suburban calm of that evening. The name haunts me still, the name of a woman without a story, of a woman I never knew. . . .

XXXI

It is night. . . . Everybody in the hotel is asleep. . . . A couple have just entered the next room. . . . I should like to stop their kisses before they begin. They disturb my meditation, my eyes are fixed on the darkness where a name in luminous letters is written, always the same name: Marie-Anne Fabulet. I see the most intimate details of the inscription, the *F* of Fabulet has lost its bar in the middle and the last letters of the Christian name are being washed out by the rain. . . . Through the night I can hear the breathing of another waking person. Sometimes the name disappears and I feel a strange movement in the depths of my being. I make a vague gesture to get rid of it. A voice solicitously inquires: "Are you suffering? . . . Tell me. Are you?"

"No."

Silence reigns again.

The noise of the kisses has stopped. I am alone with my vision. I begin spelling the letters again, mentally, one by one. . . .

The same movement occurs. . . . I can't help sighing. . . . And the voice says again insistently;

"You see, you are suffering. Why are you so obstinate? Something will happen!"

"No."

Powerless, the voice stops. My breathing grows sharper, more labored, at each sigh and at each answer.

A paleness is shoving night away, little by little it is destroying my hallucination. I try to retain it by closing my eyes. A physical sensation imposes itself more and more. I try to struggle with it, but in vain, the same movement becomes sharper, more definite, it grows and absorbs me. Suddenly I know that I'll be in its clutches soon. I'll be the prey of Nature and its formidable will.

How terrifying! My terror is resumed in a sentence:

"Take me to the Home!"

XXXII

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

First Station

JESUS IS CONDEMNED TO DEATH

The pain riveted me where I was; the clothing I held in my hand fell upon the floor. . . . I looked at it, stupefied. . . . I was afraid to pick it up or to move lest the pain should come back. . . . I was not afraid to feel it, it was not such an awful pain that my feminine body accustomed to pain could not bear it; I was afraid of what it announced. . . .

As Jesus was condemned to be crucified to redeem our sins, the Bible says: *In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children* to redeem the first woman's sin.

Second Station

Jesus bears his cross

Was I going to remain thus hoping that this semblance of death would prevent the work of life? *My hour had come.* I had wished for it, not in any thought of redemption but in an outburst of sublime love. It was that thought that gave me strength and courage. I picked up my clothes. I dressed and left that room, it seemed to me, with a halo around my head. . . . But the only thing that saw me with my halo was an array of shoes in the passage. Heavy and ungainly, I stumbled over one after another. . . . Even inanimate things were hostile to me, bearing my child as if it were a cross.

Third Station

Jesus Fainteth in Bearing His Cross

Never before had my child been so heavy. . . . I was afraid that I should be dragged down by this darling and cruel weight in descending the stairs. If I killed him! With this thought I almost fell. . . . But He, my love, was watching us both and he held me up. . . . He took two steps at once, turned around, took hold of my shoulders and the descent continued, as we looked into each other's eyes, communicants in the same misery. . . .

Fourth Station

Jesus Meets His Holy Mother

Outside. The dawn and its theatrical lighting. . . . It seemed to be waiting for us, poor heroes surrounded by ignorance and loneliness. The embankments of the fortifications ran into each other in the fog like the stations of an unknown Calvary. . . . And the barbaric songs of the truck farmers began, far away, as they were approaching Paris. . . . What sudden distress filled my heart, and who came to me to lend me a helping hand? From the depths of her misery and want a woman begging with her children had seen me stumble. . . . Were you sent to me by God, unwilling mother? The pity that came from your heart was very dear to one who, in her turn, was about to give birth to her first child. . . .

Fifth Station

Simon the Cyrenian helps Jesus to bear His cross

You wanted to help me to bear my cross in remembrance of the one you bore so many times. But He, my love, did not allow you to do so. He chose to share my Calvary. Wasn't he the one who had caused it through the greatness of his love? Your offer was an insult to his feelings. Did you see him holding me, jealously, trying to believe that his protective arm was helping me to quiet his remorseful heart?

Sixth Station

A pious woman wipes Jesus' face

And we went together towards what Fate had in store for us . . . and Fate tore us apart at the first step. I stumbled over a stone and I felt the want of his arm. My forehead was covered with sweat, it was like a crown of thorns made of tears. . . . He wiped it gently with his handkerchief. If my dolorous face did not leave any imprint on it, it was because it was not God's face.

Seventh Station

Jesus Falls for the Second Time

We had to hurry! My weakness was a danger. It threatened my child through me, who was so slow in taking him to the waiting cradle. . . . We had to go on. . . . What did the stones on the way matter! Foolish one, had you forgotten my cross? And it made me fall suddenly. His cry was an appeal to the whole world!

Eighth Station

Jesus speaks to the pious women who follow him

And at once people appeared on the street! Housewives with their milk jugs. A kind policeman and the officer of the *octroi* came from his sentry-box. They all crowded around us, touching and unable to help, but pitying me in my great plight. Their words brought it back for me to human proportions, their sympathy was so heartfelt that I forgot what they said and in my misery I knew them to be truly my brothers and sisters.

Ninth Station

Jesus Falls for the Third Time

Their arms helped to lift me. I had to stand, to suffer pain again! Another attack and, surrounded by this tender bulwark, I felt the powerlessness of human nature. . . . But I did not want my love to suffer also. I leaned on a bench and found the strength to smile; I felt like a mother already. . . . Beyond, in its surrounding foliage I could see my supreme Golgotha, Our Lady of the Angels. To reach it, I too had to accomplish my way of the cross.

Tenth Station

Jesus is stripped of his raiment

When my nervous fingers at last held the gate I believed miraculously in my deliverance, and hands fell upon my body, which had not yet accomplished its work. Those mercenary hands carried me away like a victim. In a room presided over by a Christ, they took off my clothes which fell all about the Reverend Mother like cast-offs. So we were able to look at each other, God, in our nakedness with our two symbols.

XXXIII

I found him on his knees kissing my hand, as Mary of Nazareth kissed the feet of her martyr child at the foot of the cross. . . . His kiss gladdened my solitude. . . . I saw him contrite at my feet. . . . Yes, it was on his account that my soul was in torment, that my body was preparing for the ultimate pain, and that all my being was filled with overflowing love for him. All my inner feelings were embodied in one cry: "Jean." I did not want to hear him asking my pardon. I asked him to get up and to rejoice as he did on the day of our earthly union, since we were going to be united for eternity through the child who was to be born. . . .

That feeling drove away our fears, so that we might think only of the child. . . . At this fatal hour the thought of him was given to us, who had made our sacrifice to life willingly. A strange calm came over my poor tortured body. . . . Was that calm the result of our attitude? The sun entered through the open window. . . . It looked as if we had con-

quered heaven. . . . That is why the angels came. They looked like little Sisters with their blue and white veils, fairies for the moment. . . . Their coming did not separate us. We smiled at them, then they began to play doll with the mother-to-be.

"We are going to get you ready, madame, you must be good! It is very complicated. . . . First of all, your hair—"

"How long it is—and how soft! . . . Touch it, Sister Ameline!"

"Yes, it is very soft! . . . It feels like the velvet of the Holy Altar at communion. . . ."

"Let me do it, Sister Ameline! I'll make two beautiful plaits."

"Sister Agatha, what are you saying! It is my turn today."

"Sister Ameline, shall we both do it?"

"All right! We'll see which of the two of us will make the more beautiful plait."

"What about us? What about us?"

"Peace, Sisters. Are you forgetting your duties? Each of you has her own. . . . Do it for Jesus Christ's sake."

Innumerable signs of the cross.

Who had spoken? I recognized the first angel of the company, the childish lay Sister with the blue eyes. . . . A great silence reigned after all the agitation! The two favored ones were plaiting my hair, they tied the two plaits with two gorgeous sky-blue ribbons and made two bows even more gorgeous than the ribbons themselves. . . . And they made them more beautiful with their pink fingers. The others were quite envious. A piece of ribbon is a little bit of coquetry, innocent and insinuating in the closeness of a convent. . . . A little ribbon is like a worldly dream entertained in the good and wise heart of Christ's devoted brides. . . . I let them play! . . . I let them tie my hair that no cruel scissors had cut like theirs! I put myself in their hands. . . . My Christian spirit was at peace.

The ceremony was at an end, when a triumphant voice shouted: "I am going to help her to put on her nightgown!" Eager with curiosity one of the angels seized my bag and

opened it . . . A confused murmur of admiration went around as the nightgown was slowly unfolded. . . . God, did you know? You, who are accustomed to altars draped in lace and beautiful work! . . . The gown was embroidered in the same way as the priest's alb! . . . Did you know? But of course you did, as you are everywhere. . . . Your angel came forward carrying my nightgown as a sacred oriflamme. . . . The angel was so startled that she put it on backwards.

"Stop, Sister Jeanne d'Arc! . . . You are wrong, that's not the front!"

"Sister Hélène, you are saying that to humiliate me. I know I put it on right."

And turning suddenly to my husband:

"Isn't that so: isn't that the way to put on that gown?"

And she blushed furiously, lowered her eyes and began trembling all over at having asked such a thoughtless question. And it was her ignorance that made her blush, not embarrassment. . . . O blessed modesty!

All the little Sisters were standing around

the gentleman who smiled, their eyes lowered. . . . One of them, a little more cheeky than the others, berated the bungling one:

"Of course, Sister Jeanne d'Arc would not have made a mistake if it had been a coat of mail!"

And the laughs mingled around my languid person like a lattice of charm. . . . I relaxed under its influence. . . . I didn't want to see them leaving me. . . . And I shut my eyes not to see them any more. . . . How lovely silence was! . . . A light summer wind caressed me. . . . What a delightful smell came from the new flower-beds and the first roses of the season! . . . All the perfume of the garden entered my room. . . .

XXXIV

How long did I remain in that state of bliss? Suddenly the fall of an unusual object against my shoulder made me start. My husband had succumbed to the fascinating whiteness of my pillow . . . He had fallen asleep! A maternal tear came to my eyes. . . . Poor darling! . . . So much anguish and a sleepless night had overcome him as it would a child.

He slept so soundly. . . . But if someone entered? If someone should see his weakness, a privilege I wanted to keep for myself?

"Jean, wake up!"

He did not move. . . . He must have been dreaming that our child was born and that he was happy. . . . I kissed him very gently upon his forehead. . . . And he came back to himself. He was getting up, very agitated. . . . Did he think that something had happened to me?

"Don't get excited, my love . . . here we are, the two of us, very quiet. . . . I was trying to wake you. . . ." And my motherly

fingers were seeking in vain to smooth out the marks left by the initials of the Home upon his cheek.

"You know, I was not asleep!"

"Is that so?"

"I know. . . . I may have looked as if I were . . . It was because my eyes were closed. I was thinking. . . ."

"All right, I thought you were. . . ."

We remained silent; he was ill at ease and I was devising some means to send him to rest without offending his masculine pride. I wanted him to take a rest. I knew he would need all his courage for the great trial ahead of us.

"Jean, could you not go back to the hotel?"

"What for, dear?"

"To sleep. . . ."

"At it again! Why do you want to force me to go to sleep?"

"I want you to rest."

"What a queer idea!"

"Jean, listen to me. You see I am not suffering any more. . . . The pains have

stopped. . . . I shall not be delivered for a while. If it were not so, do you think I would try to get you away?"

"Really and truly? . . . But I don't want to leave you."

"And if I ask you to?"

I saw a strange look in his eyes. . . .

"You want me to leave you?"

"Yes, so that you may get a rest. . . . You'll come back afterwards. . . "

"Well, as we men must always give in to women in general, and I, to one woman in particular, I'll go!"

He was sure of himself then. . . . He took his hat at the foot of the bed. He buttoned his coat a little quicker than he does usually . . . Then he kissed me. His kisses were full of passion and despair, they were like good-by kisses, just as at a departure when the train moves and is going to take one away, maybe for good. . . . He went out brusquely . . . I did not make the slightest move to hold him back. . . .

XXXV

He was gone. . . .

How could he have gone? . . . It was frightful!

"Jean!"

He could not hear me . . . He must have been downstairs by that time. With a great effort I managed to sit up in bed. I was able to see him crossing the garden amongst the roses. . . .

"Jean! . . . Jean! . . ."

It was dreadful, he did not hear me . . . If I had only been able to run to the window! But I was already unable to move. . . . He opened the gate. . . . I made desperate gestures. . . . He did not see them. . . . He went away down the street, very quickly, like a madman. . . . I held out my arms to him. . . . He stopped. . . . He seemed to be thinking . . . He had felt I needed him! A great joy made my head fall back upon the pillows, quivering with anticipation. . . .

My love—my love was coming back to me!

I heard quick steps in the passage. . . . He

was coming back to me! The door opened. . . . Mother Jesus-Christ entered. . . .

"Are you suffering, my child? I am going to look after you."

My heart went cold.

I was calling him and she came. . . .

Why is she not praying far away from the daylight? I saw her going about the room, busy with preparations I could not understand. I was so unhappy that I could not find anything to say to her. . . . Suddenly she came to my bedside.

"How long have you been suffering?"

"I am not suffering any more . . . Reverend Mother . . ."

"It happens very frequently. I am going to give you a bath."

"I had one yesterday—"

"It is not because of cleanliness, but to make things go quicker. I'll be able to deliver you more quickly that way."

What was that she said? She, deliver me! Had I heard properly? It was impossible; all my senses revolted! It seemed to me as if,

remaining in her hands, I could not bring forth my child; and I could not fight down that impression.

I shouted with all my might:

"I won't . . . I won't . . ."

She smiled:

"Don't be frightened, my child. . . . I can do it. I have all my diplomas."

Her diplomas! . . . She, a nun? I would never have believed it . . . But that did not allay my fears. Feverishly, I asked:

"What about the—midwife?"

"She has had a small accident in a difficult delivery. . . . Nothing serious, but she can't do anything for you today."

How very unlucky for me!

"Mother, be nice to me. . . . Please, get another midwife, anyone, but get a—"

I was going to say "a woman." I stopped in time.

I looked at her beseechingly, as though she were a saint. . . . She did not answer; no feeling of pity or impatience could be seen upon her inscrutable face. But her unyield-

ing arm went around my waist, driving away even the remembrance of the same gesture by another woman full of tenderness and love. . . .

XXXVI

The bathroom was like a crypt; it was lighted by a stained-glass window. Two Sisters, one on each side of the bathtub, watched me like the guardian angels on the tombs of Canova.

The buried—not the peaceful dead—is myself, damned with misgivings and worries; the worry that dominates all others is, "Is he coming back soon?"

Outside—that is to say, among the living—there was a perpetual movement of coming and going; strange noises of clinking metal, of spluttering flames, noises which frightened me like threats. . . . Through the different noises I tried to hear his steps. He was surely looking for me, lost and frightened; I knew though that he would discover me miraculously. . . . The comb which held up my hair fell in the water. . . . I could not take away my hands from the edge of the bath; I was too much afraid that my weight might pull me down and drown me in that perfidious water. The water was like an enemy clinging

to my pores; I felt it, penetrating me and irritating fibers which had never vibrated before. My martyrdom was approaching. . . .

"Is that not Jean near the door?"

I had spoken aloud. Startled out of their meditation, my guardian angels looked at me . . .

One of them informed me: "It is the patient who was confined this morning who is being taken back to her room."

Yes . . . it was true . . . it sounded like the wheels of a stretcher. . . . I could imagine her, very pale, as if she were dead, stiff upon the passing stretcher. . . . A murmur of voices fading in the distance. . . . How low their voices were! . . . But a very loud one ordered:

"Take her to the observation room. The doctor is coming back at eleven; he alone will look after her."

"All right, Reverend Mother."

That's she! I felt her standing in front of my door. . . . I knew. . . . She had touched the handle. . . . She was going to come in!

. . . She . . . No, her attention was required elsewhere. Her heavy, masculine steps struck the flags, down there, at the end of the passage. They became fainter and fainter . . .

I breathed more freely. . . .

But a sudden contraction made me lie with my mouth open. . . .

"You felt something?"

I signaled yes, making wild movements in the water.

"We'll call the Reverend Mother."

"Don't! Don't! I don't want her to come! Take me out of the water, at once!"

But a Sister had already gone out in the passage. The one who remained forced me to stay in the water which prickled my flesh wickedly.

An animal instinct took hold of me. . . . I fought like a wild beast with the angel, whose only care was not to hurt me. . . . She became paler than her guimpe. . . . I felt her weakening.

"Leave me alone! . . . I want to go away from here. . . . Take me out, ah!"

The dominating angel appeared. . . .

"Now . . . now . . . don't shout already. . . . We are going to take you out. . . . Sister Ursule, come here . . . help me. . . . And you also, Sister Cécile. . . . Be careful. . . . Now, that's all right. . . ."

The three of them were not too many to pull me out of the tub. The horizontal position is the most helpless in pregnancy. At last, they got me on my feet.

"Put something over her," said a modest voice.

But I was unable to walk. I put a leg forward and my innermost being seemed to be torn apart, held by an iron hook. . . . The empty stretcher was passing.

"Wait," said the Reverend Mother. "We'll take her back to her bed on the stretcher." And now in my turn I was carried along those long passages where, night and day, pale women go through, one after another, as if they were dead, with blood on their sheets.

But my blood had not yet been shed.

XXXVII

I felt it running suddenly! I could not breathe any more . . . my limbs became icy as at the approach of death. . . .

Those who lost their lives on another battlefield, with open side, feeling life escaping with this blood which is life, must have gone through the same anguish as mine. . . . The same thought of the end must have been written upon their foreheads. . . .

I was losing all my blood!

I shut my eyes instinctively not to see . . . With a nervous gesture, I pulled the sheet up to my chattering teeth. But I felt it flowing, drop by drop. . . . My legs were all wet and warm. . . .

"Help! . . . Please, help! . . ."

But I was alone, alone in that cold room, like a wounded soldier upon a cold and deserted battlefield. . . . The help the soldier was waiting for, the help I expected, when was it going to come, in the consoling form of an angel with a red cross or a blue veil?

Why had the one I feared so much aban-

doned me? I wanted to see her, as she was the incarnation of the superhuman strength I greatly needed.

Mother Jesus-Christ, you with the predestined name, why did you abandon me?

Could you not see my expiation beginning in the approach of my pain? Were you afraid to thwart God's justice in bringing me your charitable help too soon?

No, I couldn't believe it! I was so miserable. . . . The bath which you had made me take, continued its work in my womb: pinches way inside brought up some of my blood. . . . Of course I didn't feel much more in this procreating prelude than the everlasting pain of our eternal wound. . . .

What was I to feel when my body would stretch to bring a new life into the world?

Would my perilous plight make me think of the plight of my own mother?

Alas, the remembrance of my mother is only another added bitterness. And the Great War took from me my brother, the last of my family.

I was alone. . . .

Could anything be so terrible in such a moment!

But You, my love, where were you?

You, who are now all of my family. You, my only consolation, my only love. . . .

And suddenly I suffered even more; the thought of him seemed to add to my suffering. . . . It became real pain.

A quick anger filled me; I wanted to master the pain! Stretched on my bed, my fingers taut on the iron mattress, I waited for the pang. . . .

We came to grips. I believed I was the stronger. I felt already the happiness of having the upper hand; ignoring me, serene and unassailable, it possessed me. . . . And I bit my lips not to cry aloud . . .

My child was entering the world!

I did not even have time to take myself in hand. The spasms succeeded each other rapidly, more and more penetrating. . . . I wanted to stop this blood which was leaving

my body, and I saw with amazement that it was water, dirty water.

I shook my hand, exceedingly disgusted! Then a medical phrase I had read came back to my mind: *"The parturient will begin by losing water!"*

This revelation of the profane materials making up my physical being filled me with shame. . . . Nothing but suffering, relentlessly divine, could make me forget that thought. . . .

It annihilated everything, even my rebellious desire. It mastered my will as it had mastered my body. I was kept busy bracing against it. It was a constant search—still on the defensive—for bizarre poses, on the side, sometimes flat, arms outstretched, or my legs tight . . . tight. . . . Each new pang made me change my position. But I felt that very soon I should not be able to find any new ones, and that I should not even keep that tiny illusion. . . . Perspiration was covering my face. . . . It showed particularly at the corner of my obstinately closed lips. . . .

I was afraid that an excess of pain would eventually get the better of my pride, and so I should be held in the clutches of Nature. . . . Would he be here before that?

It was inconceivable that we should be separated in that moment of the supreme result of our love. . . . A higher instinct would warn him in his sleep.

Pain was pursuing me relentlessly. . . . What time was it? I saw no clock upon the bare walls. . . . I saw only Christ nailed upon His cross, suffering as I was. . . .

All kinds of noises filled the passages, plates knocked against each other, glasses tinkled.

A stretcher rolled along the flags. Doors were opened and shut, one after another, each time with the wailing of a newly-born awakened suddenly. It was an immense muted concert. . . .

I could imagine what was going on: a crowd of little Sisters pushing the tea wagon, quarreling about the plates, the silver mugs, the beautiful silver, because it was breakfast time.

Everybody was breakfasting just then, in that other plane of life. Women, who had been like me, had their infants beside them and were forgetting their meal to fondle them. . . .

The contrast of their happiness with my present situation was so cruel that in my double pain I almost let a cry escape me.

That was my last victory over my enemy. My prescience astonished me. I followed attentively the progresses of my pains. The hidden pincers did not pinch any more. It was now more like a gimlet in my flesh. I noted its regular movement as it bore round and round in my innermost being. I should have liked to know when this interior rotation was going to reach those highly sensitive nerves that are the principles of feminine life. . . . Then, I knew I was going to cry aloud. . . . I should not be able to repress my cries. And how did I know I should be conscious I was shouting?

But before I should reach that stage he might have come. . . .

Who was opening my door? . . . "Is that you? . . . Oh, how I am suffering! . . . Is that you, Reverend Mother?"

"No, this is just an ordinary mother. . . . Hush! Don't speak. . . Though it is forbidden, I came. . . . I am in the room next to yours with my baby. I left him to come to you. . . . Your moans made me feel so sorry for you. . . ."

"It is so nice of you, thanks. . . . You know, this pain, it is just as if an animal were digging into me instead of in the ground."

"Yes, I know. . . . I know. . . ."

"That's true, you must know. . . . That's why you came to me, you, who are a mother. . . . All the others have abandoned me . . . all of them! Even he, my husband! . . . It is awful!"

"He'll come back. . . . Be calm! Don't worry. It is so bad for a confinement."

"I should like to die to punish him . . . Oh, this dreadful pain again! . . ."

"Poor child! . . . Courage! You'll see, you'll get accustomed to it, you have only to be

brave. . . . Wait, I'll wipe your face with my handkerchief; there is eau de Cologne on it. . . ."

"How nice and refreshing it is! . . . Give me your hand! I'd like to kiss it to thank you. . . . Yes! . . . Don't draw it away! . . ."

She smiled at me . . . and I did not struggle any more against my weakness. I gave in entirely under the protection of that mother as close to me as a sister through our common suffering. . . .

While she was thus embracing me, finding in the remembrance of her own trial enough strength to help me, I felt in the room another presence which divided us. . . .

The Reverend Mother Jesus-Christ had come to separate two mothers as she had once separated my love and myself. . . .

Her reproachful look was turned this time toward the one who had taken pity on me. . . . I saw that young mother cringing; she bent her head and like a guilty child left very hurriedly, without even daring to look around. . . .

I shrieked, and my loud cry mingled with that of my tormented body. When I came to, Mother Jesus-Christ was standing above me like a warrior Saint Michael come to exterminate pain.

From that instant I believed in her power of delivering me. . . .

She threw the sheet aside and, unmindful of superfluous modesty, she began studying my body, its temperature, the tension of the arteries, its peculiar disturbances and even the differences of my cries.

At a more acute pang, she laid one hand upon the moving child and followed its movements.

Through the buzzing in my ears I heard her say to herself: "The dilation has ceased. . . . The big pains are going to begin. . . . Her time has come. . . ."

She went to the door and opened it.

Then she asked me to make an effort to sit up on the edge of the bed in order to put on my bed socks.

And I was thinking as I leaned tremblingly

on her bent back: "What can those pains be that the whole world agrees in calling big, as if that epithet were mysteriously reserved for them alone? . . ."

The Reverend Mother Jesus-Christ had straightened up. She wrapped me up in a huge shawl.

"Now, my child," she said to me with an unusual sweetness in her voice, "do you see that double door down there, at the end of the passage? . . . Try to run to it without stopping. . . . I'll put you on the table afterwards."

What a perspective!

I took a step backwards. But the nun pushed me forwards, forcing me to go, and I went, bent in two, puffing with pain and fear, my eyes riveted upon an inscription which seemed to shine down there, upon the dark wood of the double door, as an anathema from the Scriptures: *Delivery Room.*

It was when I raised myself to the fearful trestle, trembling on account of my appre-

hension and semi-nudity, that the first "Big Pain" took hold of me. . . .

I wanted to do as woodcutters do when they swing their axes and shout "Han" to express their effort. I was unable to articulate; all my muscles, from the most delicate near the temples and the more active ones of the larynx to those in the depths of my innermost being, seemed to have been drawn together in a single force to expel from my body its burden now superfluous. . . .

But things became soon serene again for the first time since my delivery had begun. . . . This unexpected change was dazzling. . . . My nervous system suddenly relaxed, spread like a wide net all over a calm surface. Each little vein felt a release of tension; my heart beat normally, and my mouth closed naturally. I felt the happiness of having reached a harbor of rest. . . . Not even a ripple left, only a deep peace born of the payment of Life. . . . And my mind was strangely acute, so acute that I was astonished. It seemed that from my suffering body a more powerful soul

was being born. . . . This new soul of mine was able to appreciate this human battle. A thought haunted me, absorbing all others: "How long must I suffer this way?"

A childish fear made me ask the witness of that incredible battle:

"Reverend Mother, is it going to stop soon? Please, can't you do something for me."

"Have courage, my child. . . ."

Courage! What a poor defense for human beings! And yet that word made me take hold of the two iron handles placed at the head of the bed on each side of my shoulders. I clung to them, stiffened my outstretched legs . . . and closed my eyes.

The pain was coming. . . .

This time it was from the depths of my being, throwing all my organs into panic, jamming them together; and they seemed to come up in my throat as if to find an outlet there. . . .

The travail was progressing naturally and fatally. And suddenly I thought of the child about to be born from that pain . . . this ful-

filment that my desire itself had been seeking. By evoking it, I ought to find strength to bear the suffering! I muttered between my trembling lips these words, these sweet words coming from my heart: "My little one . . . my own sweet little one, whom I am going to have soon beside me . . . I'll hold you in my arms . . . against my bosom . . . my little one . . ."

In vain. No miracle happened, my breathing became more labored. So I turned to thoughts of him, my living love, who, until now, has been my only reason for living; I turned to him, my beloved. I called to him from the depths of my soul, ardently, my eyes closed, hoping that when I opened them, he would be there. . . .

But all I saw was the face of a stranger bending over me searchingly. For the first time in my life—it was a dreadful thought and so cruel—I doubted him. . . . What an awful sensation! I had no more faith in him, I was alone again in the world, frightfully alone.

And I turned my eyes away from the door

through which he might have come in, to look through the window at the sky, the empty and unfeeling sky. . . .

The supreme cry of the Great Martyr when He threw the distress of His heart, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" to the insensible heavens could not have been more tragic or more miserable than mine.

My human impulse was to call him again. . . .

"Jean, where are you? Why did you abandon me?"

"Your husband is not back yet, my child. Don't worry. As soon as he arrives, he will be told that you want him."

"He is not here!"

I wanted to forget, to sink into oblivion.

"Reverend Mother, I beg of you, give me some morphia, put me to sleep . . ."

"Courage, my child. . . ."

The only shield I had was courage! How many hours passed thus, how many centuries!

I did not know then that I was engaged in a combat longer than ordinary. An understand-

able feeling of reserve had sealed the lips of those who were visiting me. I was different from other women through some physical peculiarity which gave them other sensations and made a great difference in time. Having a child is a very natural thing generally; in a way mothers experience normal pains and have normal reactions; but my confinement was an abnormal one. I know it is true because a great specialist told me so and also through the confidences of other women. Perhaps it had to be so that our love should be more strikingly beautiful. . . .

But I shall always keep the remembrance of what I went through in the deep recesses of my pores from which oozed, drop by drop, that other blood of human suffering: sweat.

I have still with me the unbelievable feeling of hands, almost of arms thrust into my body to snatch this life from my own life . . .

It was then my body was torn asunder . . . I uttered a loud cry, like Jesus, not to give up my soul, but to bring another soul into the world. . . .

It was the last cry of the victim, a cry of resurrection and supreme rending, the cry of a woman in travail that makes men blanch with fear. . . .

That cry brought a small being forth from my own, slowly, and I felt the shape of all its limbs as it came out, in an almost supernatural emotivity of my quivering body. . . .

And its feeble wail drowned my loud cry. . . .

Now it is heaven! . . .

Heaven after having been through hell. . . .

The absolute forgetfulness of what has been for what is: my child.

I hold him tight against me. . . .

"My child . . . my very own . . . my little one . . . What a lovely thing it is to feel him so nice and warm against my own flesh! . . . My very little one. . . . You are crying! . . . Was I hurting you with my love? . . . My very own, my sweet tiny one: . . . Please, leave him with me! . . . I want

to look at him all the time. . . I don't mind about myself. . . I don't need your care. . . I only want him. . . . I suffered so for him! Don't take him away from me! . . . Such intoxicating joy! . . . His avid mouth has found my breast." . . . And no one, in spite of my state, dared to take him away from me. . . .

There are feelings so powerful that they stop the simplest gestures, so divine that they stop death itself. . . .

And I live again in him.

My little one . . . *My little girl,* it seems, but what does it matter! I smile at the ignorance of men and at their concern about the sex of my beloved entity. . . .

My child, all I know is that it is my child, the human being born of my flesh and my suffering, the Love I created!

The Father's Letter

My Beloved:

I beg your pardon. I could have been there. I was not because I became frightened. Yes, I was frightened with an irrational fear,

panicky, the same fear that assails a nervous child at night shut in a closed room, in the dark, waiting, full of dread, his teeth chattering, for a manifestation of the unknown, for something which he knows is coming, and he does not know what. I was frightened. . . .

When you said to me, as though to a big sleepy child, "Go and rest, my dear," I did not refuse. Or, at least, hardly. . . . I took my hat so quickly that I saw a shadow in your astonished eyes. What did it matter! I ran away, furtively and slyly through the dark passages, running. I was running thus to escape the sound of your voice. It might suddenly in the convent-like silence of the place utter a cry of weakness, a desperate call. My love would have answered your call, it is so accustomed to surround you, to accompany you, my sensitive one, more lost in solitude than a little girl lost in the woods.

I would have gone back to you. But I was running so that distance would weaken your voice. My fear made me run away from my love.

It was still dark outside. I went on more slowly. I was out of the house, out of reach of your voice. I walked without stopping, straight in front of me with a jolting step, haphazardly through a deserted countryside, enlivened only from time to time by the barking of a dog or the sad hooting of the far-away locomotives. I took off my hat to cool my burning forehead in the freshness of the early morning. . . . The anguish which gripped my heart was slowly disappearing. I was breathing more freely. I felt almost happy and forgetful. It was very cowardly. Pardon me, you who have been crucified on the altar of love—I was blissfully enjoying a moment of calm. . . . But the thought came to me, while I was leaning on a rustic fence, along the railway tracks, looking towards Paris at the rising sun, that at that instant you were enduring, in your body and soul, the terrors of the greatest of human sufferings. All alone. frightfully alone, and *all on my account.*

On my account! I was seized with remorse and I remained a long time there, prostrated,

almost crumpled against the fence, imagining what you were going through! . . .

I knew that your expectant eyes were fixed on the door, the door I might open at any moment. . . . You see, I knew you would be expecting me. . . . How could I have slept through such hours? . . . My love, always so ready to look after you, to caress you, would have been unable to resist the impulse to try to help you, even if it had been only, in my ignorance of the demands of motherhood, to dry the perspiration off your face with a very fine handkerchief. . . . You were expecting me. . . . I knew it. I felt it. And in a moment of revulsion I covered my ears with my hands not to hear you in my imagination shouting my name desperately.

Then I tried to absolve myself by comparing my behavior with that of others placed in similar circumstances. . . . I tried to remember cases. . . . How many men had I seen, while their wives were being confined, with the faces of poor hunted beasts at bay, seeking excuses to leave the room, and to run, to go

away—yes, to go away; anywhere, but to go away! . . .

And thus my love was vanquished through weakness. So many false and hypocritical reasons came to my mind, one after another. My wide-open eyes did not see anything. A species of hypnosis filled all my senses. Only the noisy passing of a train woke me suddenly. I looked around me at a loss. A great light was all around me, I was prisoner of the day.

Then I went back very slowly toward Our Lady of the Angels. I went in the direction of its small tiled belfry in obedience to my loving anxiety; but I went slowly to gain time, so that I should arrive when everything would be over. . . .

I am still ashamed of my cowardice.

Why, after the subtle uneasiness of presentiments, should this idea strike me with horror: "Maybe she is going to die!" . . .

"Die! . . . O God! . . ."

That time, I ran to you like a madman.

The words of the specialist whom you visited a week ago suddenly took on an awful

significance without my having thought about them before. Had he not told you, in a casual voice, probably to put your uneasiness at rest:

"Madame, you'll have to come here as soon as you feel the first symptoms."

And he had added, after exchanging a look with the midwife of the establishment:

"You'll let me know how things are, won't you?"

What was his diagnosis, and what did he fear? Was he hiding something from us, the knowledge of some defect which would prevent you from bringing your child to life? Perhaps . . . Oh, God, if you were to die! . . .

I ran. . . . And suspicious passers-by stared inquisitively at this man who went on running, breathlessly.

The old nun who opened the gate for me was astonished to see me looking so tired.

"Where do you come from, monsieur?"

I did not answer her question; I asked feverishly:

"What has happened to my wife?"

The old nun was very calm. She answered, while counting the stitches of a black sweater on her wooden knitting needle:

"I don't know, monsieur."

I ran down a long passage where my hurried steps echoed loudly.

A door opened. An inquisitive face peered. I recognized the face of one of the young nuns.

I asked anxiously, and how my voice trembled:

"Tell me . . . my wife?"

She smiled:

"It must be all over by now—or very near the end. You had better go into her room. If she is not there yet, she'll be brought there shortly—with the baby."

"With the baby . . . I am going at once, Sister. . . ."

My great joy drowned my fatigue. "Everything must be over by now," the nun had said.

And my heart was singing: "It is over . . . happily over . . . it is over."

On the stairs a wide ray of sun fell obliquely

from a high window. Going up, I held up my head to laugh happily in its warm light.

But the voice of the young Sister was calling to me:

"Monsieur . . . Monsieur!"

I leaned over the banister.

"Monsieur, I remember now. They were asking for you a minute ago. . . . Your wife . . . wants you . . . If you do not find her in her own room, go straight to the Delivery Room . . . and knock . . ."

I hastened to your room. I pushed the door roughly and entered like a madman, with my arms outstretched. But a great astonishment stopped my rapture. My arms fell to my sides and my joy took flight like the sparrow who had been singing bravely on the window-sill when I entered the room so unceremoniously. You were not there! . . .

Full of fear, I looked to the end of the passage at the wide door of the Delivery Room with its opaque windows. On the frosted panes one could see a shadow moving to and fro. The shadow was making threatening

gestures. After all, everything was not over! The Delivery Room. That's where I had to go. That's where you were waiting for me. . . . I took some hesitating steps. . . . What an awful and bloody spectacle was going to meet my eyes when the door would be opened! . . . I clenched my fists. I was ashamed of my cowardice, but I knew perfectly well that the strange uneasiness which had mastered my will was stronger than my reason. I could not fight it.

Just then a life made out of your blood and mine, of your soul and mine, came out of your tortured body, and my body and my soul suffered with yours, mysteriously. Suddenly a terrible cry, a cry of horrible martyrdom rent the silence, thinned out, enduring a long time through the passages, as if to express the revolt of a crucified body.

And I showed that I am an absolute coward. I went away, pursued by your maternal cry, mixed, it seemed to me, with the smothered and indistinct wail of a newborn child. I ran to your room, I went to the window and leaned

out above the garden as far as I could, I listened with all my ears to the passing wind, filling them with all the noises of Paris.

I was afraid that you might cry again and I wanted all the multiple noises of the near-by town to cover your cry which had frightened me. A nervous laugh shook me like a hiccough. Do you know that I found it amusing to tell myself aloud of the miracle: "I am a father?" How complicated my love really is, though I would like it to be simple.

I remained a long time thus, clinging to the window-sill and leaning dangerously out of the window. I was trying to forget you in absorbing the scent coming from the flower-beds. . . .

"What a delightful day!" I murmured. "What a beautiful summer morning . . . and how lovely it is to live!"

And that was what came out of the awful thought which was hidden in the secret recesses of my heart: "How lucky I am to be a man! . . . She has suffered so much . . . while I breathed the perfume of summer

roses. . . . And yet through that suffering a child is born, my own child."

I became aware of a presence in the room; I stood up and looked behind me. A nun was on the threshold.

"Were you here all the time?" she said to me. "You were greatly wanted a while ago. . . . But everything went well. . . . You have a beautiful big daughter. . . . Here she is!"

And she held out the child to me. I hardly looked at her. A poignant need to see you, to hold you in my arms, drove away all other feelings.

"What about her?" I begged. "Can't I go to her?"

"If you like. She is still in the other room."

The other room! I ran there. You know the rest. . . .

When I saw you, stretched on the operating table quiet, and so pale, with dark circles under your beautiful big black eyes, your dry lips, the sweat upon your temples, and the complicated tracery of the blue veins on your

white hands, so pitifully weak, I moaned in the distress of my heart. I was no longer a coward, a nervous intellectual, complex and selfish, but an ordinary man who would then have suffered a thousand torments for your sake, without a whimper, if I could have in one swoop abolished all those you had just endured.

And that is because our child was born. The anguish which had oppressed me before the unknown was disappearing, and the mysterious and sensitive threads which had united us during the divine labor of procreation had been torn apart.

You turned your face to me as I entered. Your eyes were full of a complete surrender. They seemed to say: "I offer you all my pains, my beloved; you have hurt me so much, you, who abandoned me." To hide my tears, I threw myself at your feet. In my overflowing happiness, I should have liked to shout perfectly mad, extravagant things.

Instead my mouth met yours in a very long and intimate kiss claiming you once again as

my own; to you who through the sacred tie of blood had united our lives on this earth, I tried to give my soul for all eternity.

When I went back to your room, my beloved, full of joy at the thought that you were out of danger, I found—where had it come from? who had brought it there?—a small cradle beside your big bed.

I went up to it. There was a big baby in the tiny cradle. That baby was my daughter. She was not asleep. With her eyes, almost mauve, unseeing as yet, she was staring at the shining white of the newly painted ceiling. I bent over her. My inquisitive face was not reflected in her eyes any more than it would have been in a veiled mirror. Her crumpled face, purple a moment ago, then a violent red, was turning to a tender pink and it was taking shape and becoming quite human. She did not care about the change. At peace with everything, she was sucking her lips, contentedly. Her sucking made a gentle, moist noise. . . .

Undisturbed, I looked at her for a long time

in astonishment, as I should have looked at a strange thing to which I might have been taken suddenly and by chance, saying to myself: "There she is, look at her!"

And to convince myself, I was repeating over and over again: "That's your own daughter . . . flesh of your flesh . . . and of hers . . . of your love. . . . She is the image of your love . . . of her love. . . . She is your daughter . . . your daughter . . ."

A woman who came in said at once on seeing her: "How she resembles you!" It was true. She was like me. I only felt a foolish vanity but nothing else.

Suddenly she made a very touching and human gesture. Her tiny arm, as if it were too hot, threw aside the coverings and she opened her tiny hand slowly. Then, playfully, I poked her. Quickly, almost automatically, her silky little hand closed on my finger.

My beloved, it was so strange and so sweet.

My tiny little daughter was holding me prisoner; she was clinging to my finger, the little rascal, for dear life! And how tightly

she was holding me! How tightly . . . It was as if she were trying to keep me beside her, to prevent me from leaving her, from abandoning her cradle. . . . I lifted my hand a little. She held on as if suspended. . . .

This very tiny, warm and living thing born from your weakness was clinging desperately to me, as you do, my sensitive one, in your moments of despair, just as you do; like you, already! . . .

The deep feeling of wanting to protect the loved one which comes to all men, made me lean over the fragile cradle to defend her still better with the bulwark of my body. My kiss lingered on her face to know and enjoy its delicacy. An extraordinary feeling made me close my eyes and when two small lips, seeking for food, avidly caught mine, something divinely sweet rushed through my blood and went to my heart. My head ached deliciously. I shouted your name which is to be hers also, since my love willed it thus.

"My little one . . . my very own . . . my little one."

Her greedy mouth wanted me to give her food, and her tiny hand, grasping mine, imperiously ordered me to protect her. "In the hard struggle of life, young daughter of mine, do you know that a father twenty years old is not amongst the strongest?"

But in spite of that disadvantage your young father was full of confidence in the future. He hoped, with the presumption common to all courageous youths, strengthened by their early struggles with life, that he should be worthy of your trust in him! He took the little one gingerly in his arms. How heavy she seemed to him! Her baby cheek leaned against his and he knew then, through the joyful, loving words his heart uttered, that he had found the meaning of the word "fatherhood!"

JEAN.

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